NOVEL
1
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LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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NUDIST GIRL
VICE CLASS REP B
"What are you doing?!"
"Bath time—!
Yaaaaaay!"
VICE CLASS REP A
QUEEN BEE

HARUKA
CLASS REP
“Pssst, Haruka-kun,
why don’t you join us?”

LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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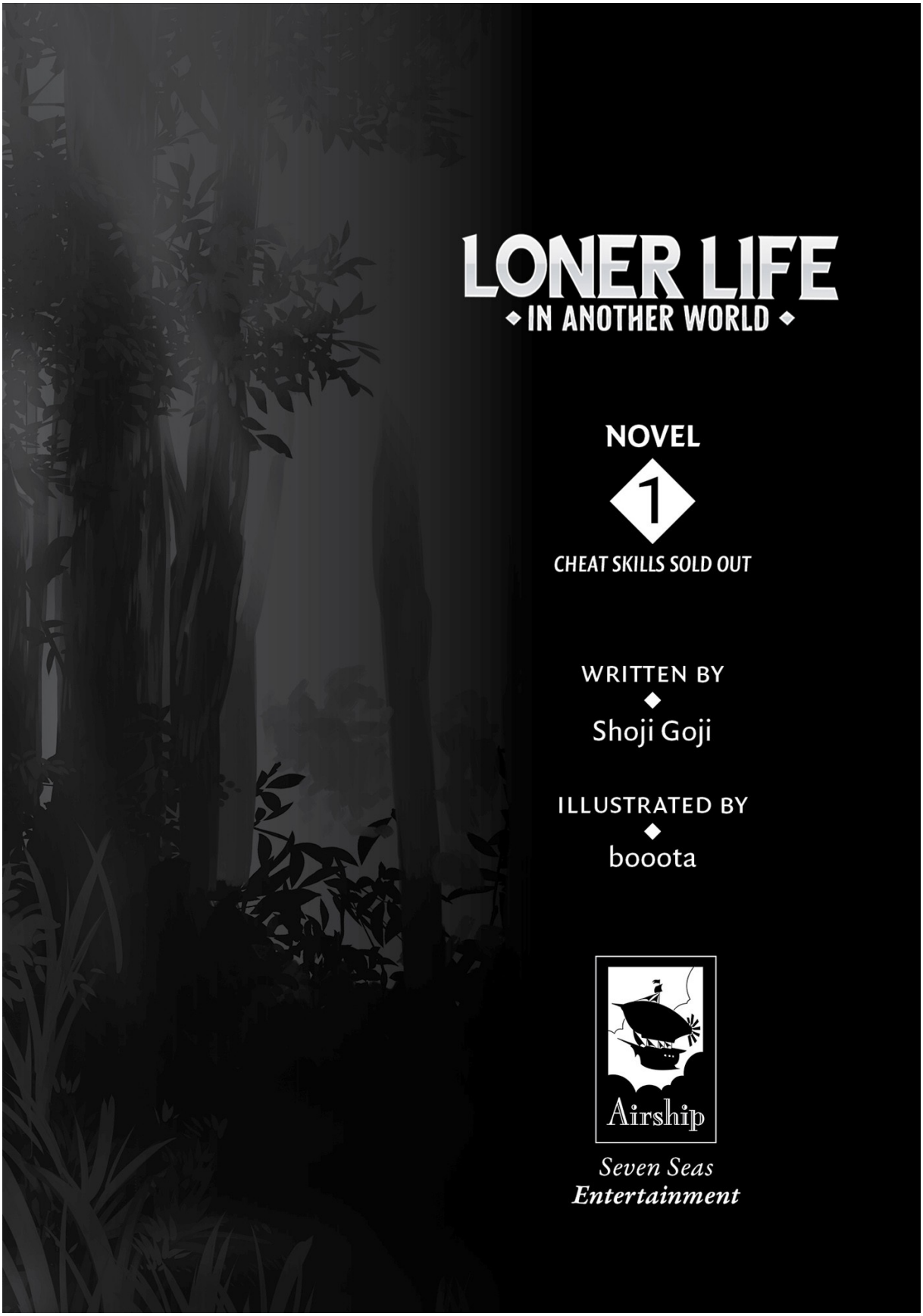

LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

NOVEL

1

CHEAT SKILLS SOLD OUT

WRITTEN BY

Shoji Goji

ILLUSTRATED BY

booota

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

PROLOGUE

MEMORIES OF MY OLD LIFE flickered through my mind like a candlelit shadow play. Were they real or just my imagination? I couldn't hold on to any of them.

I shouted, "Hey, you! What's-your-face! I've got no clue who you are, but we could stop fighting. I'm bored!"

"Damn it, I told you my name two minutes ago!" the stranger answered. "Just wait till you see the true extent of my powers. You don't stand a chance against me!"

He was exhausting all of his precious skills trying to kill me. With that brilliant mind of his, he'd assembled what he believed was the ultimate combination of skills, a combo that could kill anyone. He wasn't holding anything back.

We weren't the protagonists of this world, but he was trying to become one. We were just a bunch of kids, dropped into this world as minor characters. We ended up pointlessly slaughtering each other. Believing that he was a main character was his first—and greatest—miscalculation.

This isn't the prologue to your reign as an invincible hero, I thought. This is the end of your tale.

"Goodbye, what's-your-face."

In his quest to become invincible, he had killed my other classmates and copied their skills. He roared in anger as he stabbed at me with his sword, shot deadly magic spells, and launched every skill imaginable my way, but I wouldn't die.

He finally snapped and started screaming at me.

"Why?! Why won't you die?! According to my calculations, I should've killed you five times by now! Just *die* already!"

He attacked me with powerful, surefire skills—skills that should have been 100 percent effective, attacks that I shouldn't have been able to escape. His initial assumptions were wrong. He didn't understand all the variables. That was his own bad luck.

"What's the point of these skills if they won't work? Why won't you just die?!"

He gathered every last skill that had a 100 percent chance to kill its target. If probability meant anything, they should have devastated me. *Go ahead, use them all,* I thought. *When you run out, you'll die. I'll be the one who kills you.*

Untiring, he struggled to manipulate my body. I hadn't felt anything from the start, since I'd blocked all my nerve signals. My body was such an exhausted mess that it could hardly do anything, anyway. He kept fruitlessly flinging spells my way, trying to kill me.

As I swung my wooden stick at him, I thought about how unfair this matchup was. He had acquired a magic shield that even god-tier swords couldn't pierce, and he was immune to all magic spells. Then I thought about how ridiculous it was to even try to "calculate" what was going on in this world. A fantasy world didn't obey the rules of logic. *Death and survival depend more on trickery than calculation,* I thought, *no matter who you are.*
Once more, he took aim with his invincible killer skills, launched them with a roar, and continued to beat my body to a pulp. He wasn't even bothering to copy skills from me—not that I had anything worth copying.
As our battle went on, he burned away more cheat skills stolen from his murder victims. He had yet to realize that using those killer skills would only get *him* killed.
I had lost my right hand, and my elbow was broken so badly that my arm dangled limply at my side. Half of my face was probably burnt charcoal, and my legs were stumps. Somehow, I still limped toward him. He stared at me, unbelieving.
"What a monster…"
That's how he saw me…an incomprehensible monster. Even his precious calculations and probabilities had no explanation for me. He still didn't understand the situation he was in.
He was just another self-declared math genius who didn't realize that in this world, one plus one didn't have to equal two. His calculations could only have failed him. In this world, dice could roll numbers that didn't exist. Here, impossible things happened, and inevitable things didn't. Probability was fundamentally broken.
Yes, he was a genius who could calculate the probability of anything. But his axioms were off from the start. He swept away our classmates like pawns, took risks, set traps, tricked, deceived, and overcame the chaos of the mid-game to arrive at his perfect endgame. But when it arrived, his calculations fell apart. He encountered a monster that broke the laws of probability.
He needed to refactor all the possibilities. As he tried to account for all of them at once, he pushed against his own limits. *System overload.*
Meanwhile, I relied on my well-honed instincts. He tried to map his formulae onto a die that might not even roll a number, to establish constants for a world of variables beyond his understanding. Garbage in, garbage out.
In a continuous movement, I took a half-step and swung my staff. Your HP will hit zero, despite your overpowering defenses and immunity to magic, and you won't even know why. That was the only accurate prediction.
Must've seemed pretty unfair to him, huh?

DAY 1

A high school boy is summoned to another world. But it must be a dream, right?

THE CLASSROOM

EVERY DAY, I spent the lunch break reading a book. But don't call me a loner! Although if you did, you wouldn't be wrong.

Everyone else in the building just kept on chattering endlessly. *How could they say so little and talk so much?* I was almost impressed. Even though we were sophomores, the topics of conversation were always so juvenile. As if that wasn't enough, some of them were playing with their phones *while* they were blathering. I was sitting in the middle of the large classroom, unable to focus on my book because of their cacophonous squawking.

I didn't get how my classmates sorted themselves so neatly. Everyone was stuffed into one room—the problem kids and the model students. The elite sports teams hung out by the window, and the sporty girls sat closest to the hallway. They were all stereotypical enough to show up as extras on a TV show.

In the middle of the classroom, the straight-A students, the super-talented artsy girls, and the spoiled rich kids all crowded together. The delinquents sat in front, shouting and roughing each other up. The fashion-obsessed mean girls hung out by the window and chirped at each other in loud voices. The geeks who always got bullied sat in the back, whispering to one another. It was like our class had a caste system. But if you asked me, you might as well put the delinquent bullies and the bullied geeks in the same group. They were all equally loud and insufferable.

I didn't hate *everything*, though. I liked books. I'd read nonstop ever since I was a little kid—even picture books. You'd expect my eyes to go bad from all that reading, but I've never needed glasses. *I'd look awful with glasses, spare me ever having to wear them!*

It was too loud here. I couldn't focus. Would I have to stoop to the level of my classmates and talk to them? It was too loud, loud, loud!

Then I felt something strange.

Huh? What…what's happening?

Suddenly, the floor started to glitter with unnatural light. Looking at the glowing floor, I could see layers of round discs and strange figures inscribed with riddles and characters. *Wait—is that a magic circle? No—yes, it has to be!* I mean, if I imagined a legit magic circle, it would have looked exactly like this. From my perspective, the sudden appearance of a magic circle seemed way more plausible than having a pop quiz in math. *Bring it on!*

I rushed to the back door. It wouldn't open. I kicked it. It didn't budge. In a panic, I grabbed a chair and hurled it against the window, but the glass didn't break. *No doubt about it, we're definitely in a magic circle*. I jumped

on top of the lockers lining the back wall of the room and scrambled up to the tall locker full of classroom cleaning supplies. Concealed above that locker was an emergency hatch. I jumped up toward the hatch and grabbed the handle. Shoving with all of my weight against it, I broke free to the open sky. *I made it; I'm safe!*

The shining magic circle intensified even more, and the whole classroom filled with blinding white light. Now on the classroom roof, I started to crawl away. *But wait…that magic circle must have summoned everyone to another world, right?* I thought that only happened in anime, manga, and light novels. There was no way that this could really happen. Plus, I would much rather if the rest of Japan just went to another world without me. I kept crawling on the roof away from the light. *At this point I should be far enough—*

I got sucked into the vortex of light, screaming all the way.

Damn it! It got me! I found myself in a completely white room.
With a light that awful and blinding, it couldn't have taken me to a regular sword-and-sorcery fantasy world. This had to be some sort of sci-fi space invasion. I hoped I didn't end up in some horror-genre ghost world. But sci-fi didn't have magic circles, did it? I was brought here by magic, right? No way, that was impossible. Getting whisked away to a fantasy world wasn't some normal everyday experience, especially not by a magic circle that sucked in an entire class. There wouldn't be some god that showed up all, "Howdy, I'm just a local neighborhood self-proclaimed god. You're headed to a fantasy realm! Have fun! Tee hee!" No, this had to be some sort of weird geometry that just *resembled* a magic circle. But what kind of world would that take me to? A math world? Now *that* would be a miserable place! If you asked me what something like "prime factorization" was, I would just stare uncomprehending.
I suddenly realized that I was totally alone. If this were a light novel, someone would have greeted me when I arrived. It's a basic trope of the genre—and basic hospitality, seriously! Were they out somewhere? *If you're not going to welcome me, then don't summon me here in the first place!*

Nothing to do. Why couldn't you have summoned me to a bookstore or something, at least? Does Amazon deliver to fantasy worlds yet?
Huh? I saw some old guy appear, and he was looking my way. He looked clueless, wandering around like that. *You can't just end up in another world because you got lost looking for your own house!* No, no—could this be a world that focused on the stories of confused old people with dementia?
"What in the world are you doing here, young man?" he cried.
Uh, Gramps, are you hungry or something? You seem kind of grouchy.
"No, I am not!" he barked at me.
Great. He could hear my thoughts. This crazy old guy was the god who brought me here.
"Watch your mouth, boy! I'm not some senile old man!"
Hah, this guy will be easy to mess with, I thought. He's so senile that he starts screaming for no reason.
"I'm not senile! Listen, boy! This is important!"
But no one actually believes they're crazy, especially not crazy people.
"That's enough! Stop already! Just tell me why you're here!"
What? He was the one who summoned me here. Why was he asking me? And by the way, it's pretty hypocritical for someone who's constantly peeping into my private thoughts to tell me to stop.
We were in an epic tale of old people with dementia aimlessly milling about. The title: *The Demon King Hasn't Had Breakfast Yet?!* The latest smash hit!
"Why won't you take this seriously?" The old man sighed. "Everyone else is already over there. Why weren't you with the rest of them?"
Uh, how was I supposed to know that it would make a difference if I was out of the room?

“I wanted to summon all of you at once,” he said. “But you’re the only one out of place.”
Is that supposed to be my problem?! You’re the one who decided to bring us here! I recalled my escape from the classroom.
“What in tarnation? You got to the roof through a hidden hatch?” The old man was exasperated.
I chuckled. I’d eluded the clutches of an all-powerful god by climbing a locker to reach an emergency hatch. What a stupid oversight on his part.
“Why would I know about some escape hatch?” he shouted. “I don’t have time to mess around with architecture!”
So why wasn’t I safe after I got out of the building? It should have worked.
“I summoned you all according to a wavelength that matched the number of people. If one person was missing, the waveform wouldn’t line up. But it all worked out in the end and you got here just in time…”
So, he really could read my thoughts. That meant…Amazon probably didn’t deliver here. I’d have to settle for whichever book stores franchised in this world.
“I’m not summoning anything big like that just for your entertainment,” he said. “I can’t just make the latest volumes of your favorite series vanish from the store shelves and appear here every time they’re released. That would inconvenience the employees.”
He was quick to find faults with my plans. And I realized he was even reading my subconscious thoughts. But talk about inconveniencing someone! He was treating bookstore employees better than me! *He could stand to treat me a little better, considering everything.*
“Unfortunately, it’s my judgment upon your world to summon your group here according to the wavelength I sent out. I didn’t choose to summon *you* in particular.”
Damn him. I had no clue what he was rambling about, but if it meant I couldn’t read books, then that was just the worst! It seemed like this world wasn’t satisfied with just making life hard for bookworms; they wanted to stop us from reading altogether. *So I guess this is a battle royale scenario? I was summoned to this world to take them all down!* I thought.
“Wrong!” the old guy said. “You’re not here to fight your school buddies. If you do that, it’ll just be you bearing a grudge.”
Is he telling me to forget—
“Just shut up and listen to me!”
So then get on with it! The old guy kept prattling on and on. Just hurry up with the “Howdy, it’s me, a self-proclaimed god. Now go fight with swords and magic in a fantasy world! Tee hee!” already.
“What do you mean, ‘tee hee’?! And I’m not self-proclaimed either! Everyone else is done preparing and already on their way. If you don’t hurry up, you’ll get to the other world utterly alone. Then you won’t be able to meet back up with your classmates. You’ll be left behind, gosh darn it!”

So everyone else was together. I could tell this was going to be some cliché Middle Ages world. That meant no books, and definitely no chain bookstores. *Who knows, maybe I could still get something delivered by Amazon.*

"Of course there's no Amazon delivery!" the old guy yelled. "People would order things left and right! Just what are you hoping to do in a fantasy world with a bunch of chain bookstores and books you ordered on Amazon?"

Dude, I just want to read books, I don't want to do anything else at all. And what was so wrong with books, anyway? It wouldn't've been so bad if he decided to summon all of the aspiring novelists to one place—

"Be quiet! That's enough!"

The old guy started explaining stuff, but I didn't listen to most of it. It sounded like the usual clichés; a typical fantasy kingdom filled with monsters and legends and all that junk. *This explanation is so bo-o-oring, at least you could do me a favor and write it down? Then I'd have something to read.* I doubted the old dude would be much of a writer, but still.

"So, let's get started with the preparations," he said.

Oh great, I felt like I'd been here all day and we were only getting to preparations now? Just how long was this going to go on for? Were we going to have a food budget? Did we have to argue over which restaurant to eat at? Were there even restaurants in this world?

"Choose your skill. It's first come, first served," he added with a sigh.

"First come, first served?" I screamed. "You useless old geezer!"

"Excuse me, I am a *god*," he snapped. "I'm not just some old geezer! Your thoughts are bad enough, why does the first thing out of your mouth have to be an insult?!"

There were forty-three people in my class, which meant all the best skills were undoubtedly taken. It was the worst-case scenario. *He still hasn't even shown me the list of leftover skills…*

"Just choose your skill already." He sighed. "I never thought the day would come when some brat would tire out a god."

Finally! A large blackboard covered in words was floating in front of me. *It took him long enough to get to the point. What a selfish god.* Ugh, why couldn't he just hand me a tablet or something? Could he not figure out how to turn one on? Maybe the old man was so out of touch he didn't know tablets existed. I vaguely heard him muttering something. "Stop making fun of me… Stop making fun of me…" He was probably reciting some obscure Chinese poetry.

I decided to ignore the senile old geezer and take a look at the list of skills. I read them all in one fell swoop. There were tons, but almost all of them were taken. Did I have to go without a skill?

I saw the following text at the top of the skill list: "You can allocate 1 point to each stat. Alternately, you can set your stats by rolling dice (10 points for two dice)." I had 50 points to allocate. Obviously, it would be better to have a higher number, but all of my base stats were 10. Even if I allocated all my

points to a single stat, that would only get me to 60. I couldn't do that, obviously. I didn't know what the maximum would be after leveling up, either. "1 point each" was grayed out. As for rolling the dice…screw that. If each roll of the dice cost 10 points, and the best I could roll was a 12, the odds of doing better than just spending all 50 points normally were abysmal.

Next I read, "Weapons/Armor/Items: 5 to 50P each."

Disposable items like potions and antidotes were about 5 points each. Weapons and armor were between 5 and 30 points. And a set used up all 50 points. I wanted medicine, but it was an inefficient way to spend my points. I should try to learn healing magic. It would be pretty scary to start the game without a weapon, but those jerks had snatched up all the basic weapons and armor anyhow. *Picking last is completely unfair!*

Out of more than a hundred items, the only one left was the "Generic Villager A Set." I saw "Holy Knight Set," "Archsage Set," and "Armor Tank Set," all for the same price of 50 points—the right price for a powerful set. But I had to settle for Generic Villager A, also 50 points. *What a total rip off!*

"Contact Lenses (Better eyesight): 30P."

I definitely wanted those contacts. Bad eyesight would be a huge handicap. I would buy them in a heartbeat if they only cost 5 points, and maybe I wouldn't look like I was glaring all the time, but 30 points was just ridiculous! I supposed if your eyesight was really bad then they'd be worth the price. There was a good chance that this world didn't have any glasses. *But 30 points!*

Next, I read "Combat Skills: 10P."

That sounded fair and reliable. And the price would leave me with points to invest elsewhere, too. I saw Fencing, Sword Fighting, Polearm Mastery, Archery, Whip Mastery, and every other type of martial arts that I could imagine. All sold out.

The only one left was "Cane Mastery (The ability to wield a cane or staff): 10P." I'd need a cane, but 10 points wasn't so bad. But how could I survive a fantasy world armed with what was basically a stick? I wasn't a kid trying to harass a bunch of turtles at the beach! And even then, a stick wouldn't be enough. *Not that I would ever bully turtles, I'm not a weirdo!*

The last category read "Abilities: 10P ~ 30P." Not cheap, but this is where secondary world fantasies really stood out. They were practically cheat codes! There was the crowd favorite, "Experience Boost." There was "Black Magic." "Bandit's Plunder"—what the hell? There were even psychic abilities like Clairvoyance. I saw so many awesome abilities—damn it, they were *all* taken! And the ones left, my god, they were abysmal!

The first one in the list was "General Health: 30P." I could see that being really useful. There definitely wouldn't be any hospitals over there. But I couldn't ignore the price. Sure, I could try to lead a peaceful, healthy life in a fantasy world, but what good is health if I can't even win a fight against the first monsters I meet? 30 points was just too rich for my blood.

Next up: “Walking (The ability to walk exceptionally well): 30P.” Again, it seemed practical but not worth 30 points. In a world with “Experience Boost,” how could being able to walk *exceptionally well* even compare? Was everyone else just stumbling around like a bunch of drunk toddlers? Was some accursed demon king just playing a prank on this world? Could this next skill be any better?

“Calisthenics (Skilled at exercises): 30P.” Calisthenics?! Please don’t tell me that guy who does the exercises on TV is in this world? I couldn’t handle it. What a total joke.

Last and perhaps most terrifying: “Sensitivity (Your body becomes more sensitive): 30P.” They had to be kidding me. How could they possibly make teenage boys *more* sensitive? What was this, a boys’ love universe? I didn’t need sensitivity! Although half the students were girls, anyway; was this some weird sex world? *To be totally blunt, I don’t think any girl would want to practice this kind of skill with me, but should the impossible happen, I’m ready and willing.*

Until I saw the fourth category, they may as well have been sending us to the dark ages.

“Magic: 10~30P.” Jackpot! The Four Elements, Lightning, Healing. *These are perfect, but they must all be taken, right?* Seeing those skills made a warm swell of emotions flow through my chest. *I’m not crying, you’re crying!* I noticed that the old guy had averted his eyes from me.

Only four types of magic remained. “Heat: Magic that raises the temperature 30P.” That would be pretty handy if I were reborn as an otherworldly vending machine. *Yes, I’ll take another coffee, thank you!* At least people would pay me for that.

“Packing (Magic that can pack boxes): 30P.” *Oh, so I can go work in an Amazon warehouse?*

“Weight (Increase or decrease the weight of objects): 30P.” *What, to lower the postage on my shipments?*

“Movement (Assistance when moving): 30P.” Huh? How wasn’t this the same as that walking ability? These abilities were all awesome if I wanted to work at the goddamned post office!

The fifth category was “Special Abilities.” Things like sword mastery, magic mastery, lowering the amount of experience required for certain tasks. If you grabbed one of those skills alongside the “Hunting Experience Boost,” you’d basically have a cheat code for leveling up. Surprising no one, both were taken. There was seriously nothing left…

“Corporate Initiative (Skill at reporting, contacting, and consulting others).” *Others being who?! Your fantasy regional manager?* Were we in a businessman universe? If you leveled up enough, you’d become the CEO of a multinational corporation? Were the dungeons furnished like office buildings?

“Master of None (Slower level-up rate).” Now that was a straight up penalty! Who in the world would take that? Was it a trap for anyone who somehow misclicked?
“Blockhead (Get worse as you level up).” Another trap option! Why would anyone purposefully choose abilities that made them worse as they spent more time in the world?
Maybe “Master of None” meant that you leveled up more slowly, but you had an easier time acquiring skills. But that still didn’t explain “Blockhead.” Was it for idiots? Or people who just wanted to cheer on another player? Truly a fate worse than death.
The final category was “Titles.” They were all cheap, about 10 points, but none of them seemed like they had any obvious use. They probably just helped determine your job.
But even if a title didn’t give me an immediate buff, it might be the most effective option in the long run. Looking through, I saw options like “Master Swordsman,” “Guardian,” “Grand Magus”—goddamn it! What the hell! Even these options were sold out! These were the kinds of titles that spoke to the heart of a dweeby twelve year old. Yet they were all taken by my classmates, who were ostensibly mature high school sophomores! I guess being called a “Master Swordsman” in a fantasy world isn’t as unspeakably lame as it was when I went through that phase in junior high. Still, even in a fantasy world, I couldn’t go around giving myself an over-the-top title. *Good luck trying to live up to the expectations of the titles you picked.*
But at least those titles were kind of cool. The only two titles left were the absolute worst!
One was “Shut-In (Doesn’t leave their home, protected by their dwelling).” So a recluse who lives with their parents. *Uh, but weren’t we summoned to another world? There is no home here to refuse to leave!* It would be impossible to be a proper shut-in even if you tried. Maybe if there was book delivery. *But there’s not!*
The final title: “NEET (Unemployed).” Shouldn’t we all be more concerned about getting killed by monsters than whether we have day jobs?
Those were all the ways I could spend my stat points. The list was over. My *life* was over. This old man must’ve gone completely senile. Just what in the world did he expect me to do?
“Hey, Gramps,” I called to him, “look at me, won’t you? Don’t you have anything to say to me? Why don’t you stop pretending I’m not here and look me in the eye?”
No matter how much I tried to get his attention, he kept his gaze turned away from me. From the moment the blackboard popped up, he acted like I had become someone else’s problem.

Some time passed. The old dude was sitting down a few feet in front of me, just asking me over and over again what I wanted to do.

He had taken us high school students out of our normal lives and brought us here for some mysterious reason. It was the will of a god, divine providence, whatever you wanted to call it. You'd think that there would be a good reason for that happening, but hey, maybe it was just some unavoidable coincidence. Since you couldn't just throw kids into a fantasy world arbitrarily, you sweetened the deal by giving them a bunch of special skills. Sure, that made sense.

If it was all a big mistake, then the least this god could do was give us all skills to help us survive in the world. That was the role of a god, after all. And if there was no mistake, if there really was some reason why we all got summoned here, then the skills would be necessary to help us survive and accomplish our hypothetical quest.

Either way, that was the point of the skill list that the old guy kept asking me to choose from. But none of the remaining skills would help me survive here. None of them would help me fulfill any particular mission. *You aren't doing your job as a god! So what's even the point?*

He tried to stammer out an excuse, and I glared at him. He sat down cross-legged and I glowered at him. I put all the anger I could into my stare.

The old man's eyes grew shiny with tears. As they dripped down his face into a puddle, he explained himself.

"Up until now, I've only ever summoned about thirty people at once. There were always plenty of skills to choose from. A lot of people even saved skills for the people who came after them. But this time, I had forty-three people, so even the ones at the end had to scramble for the best skills.

"I've never dealt with someone far enough from the summoning circle that they arrived after everyone else already left," he continued. "All of the skills here are the remnants of people who have achieved something in this world, recognized by the gods. That is a list of all the talents that have earned the recognition of the gods—talents that belonged to heroes who became gods, or even *surpassed* us. And it's not just a list—these are actual remnants of those heroes' souls, each one alive with its own feelings.

"Even a god cannot fully understand someone who's surpassed him. It's up to you to choose a skill, feel its soul, understand its way of life, and receive the power it bestows upon you. Each skill here comes from someone who has achieved greatness, you see? True mastery comes from understanding the soul of a skill—how its original bearer achieved what they did. If you can't do that, then even the most powerful skills become meaningless, or even an annoyance."

The old fart continued between overwrought sobs, "Even I don't understand all of this. There are so many skills that I've never seen before. However, each skill has some meaning, some purpose. They wouldn't be on the list otherwise."

Tears streamed down his cheeks. He stood up at times for emphasis, but his legs trembled like those of a baby fawn. *This is bad, his eyes look totally deranged!* It was like a demon had possessed him; he was practically

foaming at the mouth. And what he said about those skills—that was crazy! The concept was way too dangerous! He was talking about souls that surpassed gods! Souls?! These were more than souls, they were straight up demons! *Old dude, you've got to get out of here, too!*
"They surpass the truth that I know and the providence I dispense, even as a god," he said.
That's messed up! You can't surpass a god!
"This perilous position is a golden opportunity! Over the precipice I go!" he shouted wildly. "Here it comes! Here it comes!"
This is bad. He's gone off the deep end.
"Here it is, this is the truth!" he cried.
Did he have a nervous breakdown?
"Here it is! I'm baring my soul! My gift!"
What was he talking about?
"I'm giving you everything!" he wailed.
Everything? *Even delivery service for all my books?* What was he talking about now?
"All the skills! You can take every last one!"
Every last one?! Was he giving me everything…no, was he trying to surpass his god form and become one of those souls—or *demons*—himself?! Even a god shouldn't go that far!
"Hang on, hang on!" I yelled as I realized what he was doing. "I don't want them, dumbass! That'd be like playing on nightmare difficulty!"
"Hah! Do you suffer? Laugh through the pain!"
You stupid old man! He was raving mad.
"Farewell!" he roared.
As the world faded to black all I could do was scream, "Farewell my ass!"

I was in the middle of a forest. My head hurt. He really did send me to the other world.
There was no one around. I didn't want to look at my stats, but I couldn't avoid it any longer.
"Status," I said.
"Please roll your dice," said a voice inside my head.
Oh, so now I need to roll the loaded dice? Hang on—he really did give me all of those skills?! I wanted to scrub the stench of those garbage skills off of me.
Two dice manifested in my hand. I chucked them blindly. Both of the dice landed on a side that read "M."
"What the hell is going on?!" I shouted.
"Please assign your first roll to an attribute," the voice said.
Was M some sort of ability modifier? If my ability scores were 10 points by default, how many points would M add? *It must raise my stats, it has to.*
Unless M was short for minus? *There was only one way to find out.*
"I'm betting it all on luck," I said.

After all the misfortune of today's events, I was desperate for some luck. I didn't have time to worry about strength.
"Luck plus M," the voice said. "Please assign your second roll."
Was that the most it could boost my luck? If M meant minus, then that meant my luck just dropped to 0.
Worst-case scenario, it could go negative. But I had to choose luck—If my HP went to 0, then I'd be dead. Any other stat was just as risky. Plus, I could use as much luck as I could get. Maybe it would even reduce damage dealt. I'd have to deal with the consequences down the line, but I was desperate.
"Luck," I said.
"Luck increased," the voice said. "Displaying Status."

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 01
JOB: —
HP: 10 MP: 10
VIT: 10 POW: 10 SPE: 10
DEX: 10 RES: 10 INT: 10
LUK: Max (Above Limit)
SP: 0
COMBAT: Cane Mastery Lv1
MAGIC: Heat Lv1, Movement Lv1, Packing Lv1, Weight Lv1
SKILLS: General Health Lv1, Sensitivity Lv1, Calisthenics Lv1, Walking Lv1, Consultant Lv1, Servitude Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv1, NEET Lv1, Loner Lv1
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv1, Master of None Lv1, Blockhead Lv1
EQUIPMENT: Cloth Bag

My luck was above the max limit. Which means that M meant Max! *Why not just write the damn word, it's only three letters!* I should've used it on power or speed. I screwed up.
It wasn't a total waste. Luck was also a necessary attribute. And since I didn't know what "M" meant at the time, it was the right call. I couldn't just gamble my life on those dice.
But after Max it read "Above Limit." Was that a good thing? I'd never seen that before in a game. It had to be good. I assumed that I was rolling regular six-sided dice, but I rolled an M. That was the best roll, a perfect roll. Any other result would have spelled disaster. At the very least, I knew that luck was on my side.
So even if I leveled up, my luck wouldn't go up anymore. Max stats came up pretty often in the light novels I read. And looking at my status, the geezer really did dump all the leftover skills on me. They were all trash, but two of

them were new to me. Did I somehow earn them with my lucky roll? I took a look.
“Loner: Lives alone without companions. Cannot form a party. Wields Servitude.”
“Servitude: Shares experience.”
So nothing’s changed, huh? You didn’t need to make it my ability!
I came here alone and friendless to begin with. Somewhere deep down, my inner pervert had been praying that this was a harem universe. I stifled my inner pervert’s tears.
“Servitude” was an extra skill granted by “Loner.” I assumed it meant that I could at least collect some monsters who’d join me. Overcome with sadness and loneliness, tears of gratitude stained my cheeks. *At least there will be some fluffy monsters to cheer me up.*
I almost forgot about my bag! It was the Generic Villager A equipment set. I had no way of knowing how safe I was in this forest. I would feel way more secure if I had a stick in my hands.
I emptied the bag. These rags would be a hassle to wear but I was definitely grateful for the leather boots—wearing indoor shoes in the forest could be hazardous. The cloak was also better than nothing, and I could use it for defense if necessary. Since it was black, it would also hide me from monsters at night. Surprisingly, Generic Villager A’s gear wasn’t half-bad. The leather gloves were nice, too. Digging deeper in the bag, I found a ring. Generic Villager A must have worn it, and it might have some effect, so I put it on. I was glad the bag had so much gear. *Who knows what else I might find in here?* Despite its light weight, it was full of useful stuff.
I looked around and didn’t see anyone. *Not a trace…*
Did my classmates get summoned to the same area? I couldn’t decide whether to bother looking for them. I was sure the rest of them were all together, and there *is* safety in numbers. Also, unlike me, they got all those ridiculous cheat skills. If I wanted to stay in one piece, catching up with them might be a good idea.
Except…my main worry wasn’t whether they were strong enough. The problem was that they were my classmates.
I was a Loner anyway, so I couldn’t join any party. Even if they were strong, they wouldn’t be able to help me. Plus, I knew I couldn’t rely on them. There were too many bad eggs.
So, going it alone as usual? Yeah. Tracking down my classmates would be a total chore, anyway.
The forest was too dense to see much. The dappled sunlight filled the undergrowth around me with ominous shadows. There might be monsters hiding in those shadows. My eyes struggled to focus. Did I need glasses?
Wait a second! If I got everything, where are those expensive contact lenses? When I rummaged through my bag, I found a small container—and inside it, a glass bottle filled with some sort of fluid. My search turned up two other similar bottles. Maybe one of them?

It was my first time putting in contacts, and I was in the wilderness. These weren't exactly sanitary conditions, but if I didn't put them in, I might never escape this forest—and honestly, not being able to see was pretty scary. On the other hand, if I dropped the contacts, I would *really* be stranded. Okay, I could spread out a cloth first so I wouldn't risk losing them. Why was I so anxious?

I put the contacts in. "Ugh…" I moaned. A headache suddenly bloomed behind my eyes. Was it the contacts' fault? I didn't have any friends who wore contacts in school, so I didn't know what to expect. *I just have to get used to it, I guess.*

When I turned around, I could see everything around me in eerie detail. The scene instantly impressed itself onto my mind.

I could even see bugs on the leaves of distant trees. *Having good sight is pretty gross,* I thought. With eyes like this, it'd be easy to travel at night. I also had the Walk ability. *Let me just clean this up—huh?!*

Just when I went to put the contact solution away my fingers brushed against the two other bottles, and I saw the labels pop up—"Potion" and "Antidote." So that's what they were. I took another look at my status and saw a new skill.

"Appraisal Lv1."

So, I had an appraisal ability? But why did it suddenly appear? That was strange… It must have been an added bonus from the contacts. Sadly, I couldn't appraise my contacts while they were in my eyes, so I couldn't confirm my theory.

Still, I needed whatever benefits I could get. Before the old geezer became totally incoherent, he told me I would be able to understand the language in this world once I got here. And now, with Appraisal, I felt ready for whatever the world threw at me. *Well, if I'm not, game over.*

I used Appraisal on my surroundings as I walked through the shadowy woods. It was almost fun, like a virtual botany textbook. I got a notification that some mushrooms nearby were edible. *Appraisal really will come in handy!*

"Potential Mushrooms: Food. Latent power up."

So, they boosted my latent power, whatever that was. Something latent inside of me? *Let's not encourage whatever lurks in the heart of an unemployed shut-in loner*.

I walked toward the mushrooms. While there was only one bunch of Potential Mushrooms, there were more edible mushrooms nearby. The forest floor was dotted with clusters of endurance-boosting and magic-boosting mushrooms, and some that recovered HP and MP. I supposed there wouldn't be any magic potions growing on trees, but good food would probably keep me healthy enough.

I didn't have anywhere in particular to go, so I kept heading in the direction of the mushrooms, collecting a ton of them as I went. It was fun to use Appraisal and pick the mushrooms, so I kept doing it without really thinking

much. I collected way more than should have been able to fit in my small bag, but it didn't feel heavy at all.

Sorry, Villager A, for thinking your bag was crappy. It was really a bag of holding. The ability to understand the language, an appraisal ability, and an item bag that's bigger on the inside—it was a surprisingly solid start.

The 50-point Generic Villager A set still seemed a little too expensive, but maybe that was the price to pay in this world to get all these valuable basics.

If only I could've just taken the Generic Villager A set and ignored all the other bizarre skills. Then the old geezer wouldn't have given himself an aneurysm shouting at me. I wondered if the other gods were getting him professional help now.

I even had medicine, and there was still more in the bottom that I hadn't inspected yet. *I really lucked out with this bag!* I mean, I probably should have realized that something was up when it produced a three-foot stick and knee-length leather boots. This bag should've been *way* bigger. I wanted to stay calm, but I was internally freaking out. The bag that broke the laws of physics pushed me over the edge. *Now I have to figure out where I am,* I thought.

I continued to appraise everything as I explored the area around me, waving my stick through the air as I walked. *I'm definitely dead meat if monsters show up*. My weapon was a literal stick. My weapon skill was supposedly Cane Mastery, but I wondered if stick swinging even counted as a fighting style.

I narrowed my eyes. The way ahead was bright; I was finally leaving the forest behind. *It really is awesome to be able to see so far!* It was like my eyes had built-in optical zoom. *Thank you, beloved contacts!*

Soon, I reached a riverbed. *A river—water!* But I couldn't drink unboiled water, so I kept walking.

Besides, I don't have anything to draw the water with, I thought, but as I reached into the bag, the words "Cup," "Canteen," and "Pouch" all floated up into my head, and I pulled out a canteen full of water! I drank it.

Delicious mineral water! I guzzled it down. This stuff would be expensive if you bought it from a vending machine. *If I could just do online orders, I could get the best mineral water and all my books, too…*

Maybe I could get books if they were put right in the middle of the magic circle that summoned us? I figured if a cat or something wandered into the circle, it would end up coming here, but the same wasn't necessarily true for books or an Amazon box.

I could see fish in the river. *So…baked fish and mushrooms for dinner,* I thought. I stood next to the river with my stick primed and ready for an epic piscine battle.

The baked mushrooms were tasty. As it turned out, I couldn't catch fish by standing knee-deep in a river waving a stick. I could have thrown it at the fish, but then I would have no fish and no stick.

I walked on until I found a cave of some sort. Or was it a cavern? *Is there a difference?* Maybe there was some sort of cave boss, some monster waiting to ambush me if I went in.

I crept up to the mouth of the cave and peered inside. *Phew, nothing there. No cave boss.*

"Excuse me?" I walked inside, calling out like a customer in an empty store. It felt like trespassing in someone else's house. The cavern was wide and deep, maybe even 20 feet by 20 feet—much bigger than my 100-square-foot room back in Japan. It was pitch-black inside.

Standing at the entrance, I opened my bag. It was definitely bigger on the inside—I reached in and pulled out an entire tent. *I guess that isn't too weird in a magical fantasy world.*

"Magic Tent: When activated with magic, opens and closes automatically. Room temperature. Bug and monster repellant."

Hah, so monsters are no better than bugs?

"Magic Lantern: When activated with magic, switches between On, Off, and Blink settings. Bug and monster repellant."

Take that, monsters! It could even blink. I could use this lantern to signal in a car without taillights, not that there were any cars here. But how was I supposed to "activate with magic"? I'd never used magic before, but it was worth a shot.

"O magic power that dwells within me, I unleash you unto the world—anything?"

What if I was having some sort of fever dream? What if I just shouted that out loud in the middle of class?

The Bag of Holding was big enough, so why didn't anyone think to pack an instruction manual? Lantern in hand, I continued my experiments.

"O magic power, I command you to light the lantern!"

Still nothing? Please, please tell me I'm not insane…

I kept trying. I sat cross-legged and focused. I tried to sense my magic power. Take it, control it. But nothing felt different. *Damn it, I don't know how to use magic!* Did I need to use a specific spell or chant? I didn't want to give up yet. I wasn't crazy. This was definitely a magical world.

"Just turn on, you piece of crap!" I shouted.

The lantern flicked on.

"Turn off," I commanded, and it turned off. "Turn on" turned it on. *That's all?*

If that was all it took, why didn't the description just say so? Instead of all that ostentatious "When activated with magic" twaddle they could've just written "Pick it up and tell it to turn on." I had been on the verge of inventing ritual dances for nothing. *Though I guess acting like a mighty wizard is kind of fun.*

So all I had to do to use magic was to touch whatever I was commanding and tell it what to do. There was no need for “Undying light of the firmament, I summon and bind thee!” or “By the ancient blood of my ancestors, bring forth your gross incandescence!” or any fancy incantations at all. *Honestly, it would be way cooler if I had to say that stuff*.

I took the tent out of the bag and said “Open.” It sprang right up, even though I had thought up all sorts of fanciful spells to try. *I’m glad it opened, but I want to say something like “Against ravenous beast and creeping vermin, offer me your solace!”* Magic was almost dull without that kind of thing.

It was getting dark outside. I’d traveled as far as I could today. It’s not like I had a destination in mind, so this was as good a place to stop as any.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I stared at my hands for a while and noticed that ring. That was an item, right? If it was Villager A’s engagement ring, I wanted to give it back. Villager A was really saving my butt.

“Appraisal,” I said.

“The Ring of the Destitute: For the soul of the abandoned life. Lifesaving. ? ? ?”

Huh? Is this ring cursed or something? That sounded terrible! Other than “lifesaving,” it had question marks where the actual effects should be. And what did “lifesaving” mean?

“Lifesaving: Immediately before HP reaches zero, restores MP and HP to full.”

Wow, I can even use Appraisal on descriptions. In any case, lifesaving was an amazing skill to have. It would protect me against even mortal wounds. But did that description mean it saved your life at the cost of your soul? I didn’t get it.

I gathered some firewood from the nearby forest. There wasn’t a lot of dry wood, but I found enough to start a fire. I wanted to repel monsters, and the cave was damp, so I definitely needed to get one going.

I started by using my Heat Magic to raise the temperature of the wood, a method I’d figured out to bake the mushrooms earlier. Eventually, something sparked. I nearly cheered before I realized it was just the kindling.

I pushed the temperature even higher, and finally the wood started to smolder and burn. I felt like my Heat Magic level must’ve gone up? When I checked my status, I saw “Fire Magic Lv1” and “Heat Magic Lv2.” *Not only did my skill level improve, but I learned basic Fire Magic, too!* So starting one fire was enough to give me that ability? I had no idea how skill acquisition worked in this world. Maybe Fire Magic was part of a skill tree connected to Heat Magic?

Until now, my only plan for fights was to swing a stick at the enemy, so Fire Magic sounded good to me. I wanted to practice more, but I could barely keep my eyes open. Before I drifted off to sleep, I checked my status one more time.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 01
JOB: —
HP: 10
MP: 10
VIT: 10
POW: 10
SPE: 10
DEX: 10
RES: 10
INT: 10
LUK: MAX (Above Limit)
SP: 0
COMBAT: Cane Mastery Lv1
MAGIC: Heat Lv1 Movement Lv1, Packing Lv1, Weight Lv1
SKILLS: General Health Lv1, Sensitivity Lv1, Calisthenics Lv1, Walking Lv1, Consultant Lv1 Servitude Lv1, Clairvoyance Lv1, Presence Detection Lv1, Enemy Tracking Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv1, NEET Lv1, Loner Lv1
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv1, Master of None Lv1, Blockhead Lv1
EQUIPMENT: Tree Branch, Clothes Set, Leather Glove, Leather Boots, Cloak, Contact Lenses, Ring of the Destitute, Cloth Bag

I figured I must've gotten Clairvoyance because while I was wandering around, I kept focusing on faraway objects. Thank god for my contacts. Good eyesight really was a blessing. Who knew how badly I would've done without Appraisal and Clairvoyance.
Is it just me, or is this more like a survival game? Normally you'd get summoned by some princess or a beautiful sorceress, right? I just got dropped in the middle of a forest. Divine providence brought us all here, so it must have done so for a reason. Were we destined to start new lives in this world, no strings attached? No, there had to be monster-slaying or some ridiculous quest involved. *I wouldn't mind just living here,* I thought. *However…if this* is *a survival game then I'll be stuck in these woods for the rest of my life. Oh no!*
"Presence Detection" and "Enemy Tracking" were also new skills. I guessed that I got them because I was so paranoid about monsters ambushing me. Was it really that easy to get new skills? Maybe all the skills offered in that white room were overrated after all. Just what did that old geezer do to himself, anyway? No, I shouldn't think about it. He said that skills came from beings greater than the gods. That sounded dangerous.

My first day in this new world came to an end. *Now to dream of online book delivery…*

DAY 2

What would be the hardest radio exercise program of all time?

THE CAVE

I OPENED MY EYES and saw the ceiling of the cave. An unfamiliar ceiling! *But why would I get worked up over a ceiling?*

Nothing had disturbed my sleep that night. The combination of the monster-repellent tent, lantern, and the Shut-In ability probably kept me safe. Would this cave remain safe if I left? I still needed a front door and a mailbox for this place to feel like a real home.

My campfire had burnt out overnight, so I lit it again with my Fire Magic. To even get a spark, I had to cradle the embers in my hands. *No fireballs for me.* How did anyone manage to shoot fireballs without burning their hands, anyway?

From that seemingly bottomless bag, I pulled out a knife, a cutting board, a pan, some preserved meat, mushrooms, salt, a plate, and a cup. Generic Villager A was definitely the most impressive guy in the village.

I put the pan over the flame and raised the temperature until it started to smoke. I sliced the meat, chopped the mushrooms, fried them until they browned, and then added a little water and stewed them for a bit. I gently shook the pan so the bottom wouldn't burn and let the water boil away. Then I took it off the flame and added some salt. *Smells great!* For the time being, the only food I had in my bag was the meat and mushrooms.

Salt was the only seasoning at hand, too. I'd be all out of food soon enough. I needed a way to get more meat and fish. Maybe I could forage more in the forest, although yesterday the only things I found to eat were mushrooms. Maybe Takenoko chocolate snacks grew like mushrooms in the woods. *Man, my classmates would start a war over those.*

While I was cooking, I contemplated my options. First, I needed a permanent place to live, a way to get food, and a way to protect my dwelling from monsters.

This cave would work fine as a home. Sure, my tent would make it easy to stay on the move, but it felt safer to have a cave to retreat to. A cave was the perfect place for a shut-in, too. I could always move on once the food in the area ran out. Food and safety had to be my top priorities. Typically in a game, you would just start adventuring, but I was a shut-in and a loner, right? I probably couldn't travel too much even if I wanted to.

I returned to the forest to collect more mushrooms. I relied on Appraisal and Enemy Tracking as I explored. Yesterday, I'd followed the river upstream, so today I continued in the same direction.

I found tons of mushrooms and herbs, but I also saw tracks left by some sort of animal. I kept my distance. I gathered some kindling, lumber, and even

ivy. Games usually began in a castle or small village, but this was the tale of my lonely forest survival adventure! Why even summon me into a fantasy world, anyway? I was basically dropped into *Robinson Crusoe*.
At around noon, I headed back to the cave. I couldn't have used a phone or watch here even if I had them. *I shouldn't have to explain why those things were useless in this world, so don't even think of asking!*
Soon enough, I was out of the woods. The cave was straight ahead, but for some reason I felt rooted to the spot. I could sense that something was off. A monster? One of my classmates? Whatever it was, I could tell it wasn't friendly. *Go on, scram!*
I hid behind a tree and scanned my surroundings with the Appraisal ability. I held my breath and strained to hear even the smallest sounds. While searching, I did my best to remain hidden. There it was! I used Appraisal.

Goblin A
RACE: Goblin
LV: 08
HP: 36
MP: 4
VIT: 27
POW: 22
SPE: 13
DEX: 8
RES: 2
INT: 1
LUK: 16
COMBAT: Hammer Mastery Lv2, Great Strike Lv1, Body Slam Lv1
SKILLS: Super Horny Lv1
EQUIPMENT: Club

It was a humanoid creature, neither human nor animal, with an ugly face and a short, stout body. *A goblin, the smallest of the small fry*. If I couldn't take it down, that would be it—the premature end of my tale.
I'd been led to believe from playing video games that even kids could take down a goblin. But those stats were actually pretty high—and worse, there were two of them.
The weak had to defeat goblins and level up to get stronger. That was the basis of any game. Goblins and slime monsters were usually the weakest. So why were their stats so much better than mine? Was I really that weak?
I'll have to beat them sooner or later.
If I moved quickly, I could launch a surprise attack. On the other hand, if they caught me by surprise, I'd be totally screwed. Surprise attacks gave a huge advantage to the attacker. I could try to separate them and defeat them one by one, or wait until they wandered into advantageous terrain. I

just needed to time my attack carefully…though surprise and tactics would be useless if I couldn't finish them off quickly.
The biggest problem was their HP and vitality, followed by their power. All my stats were 10, so they had nearly four times my health and three times my vitality. I'd have to hit them a bunch of times to take them out, but they could probably kill me in one blow. I estimated that I'd have to hit them ten times each without getting hit once. A sneak attack wouldn't be nearly enough.
Since we had about the same speed and dexterity, I couldn't overwhelm them with quick hits. I'd have to win based on my intelligence and luck. My intelligence was ten times higher than theirs, and my luck was essentially infinite. Hopefully, intelligence meant the same thing in this world as in Japan. It was worthless to me if it was just a spellcasting stat.
My only weapon was a stick, and I didn't even know how powerful it was. It had a question mark in its description, so maybe I'd be able to knock them out in less than ten hits. I had to assume that the heavy clubs they carried would do a ton of damage, but maybe their weight would slow them down, which I could use to my advantage.
And if I aimed for the backs of their heads or something, maybe I would deal a lot more damage than just randomly attacking. It could be a double damage bonus, or maybe even ×5 damage. *Don't underestimate surprise attacks and other dirty tricks!*
I didn't yet understand how much the stats would influence a real fight, and I needed to get some practical experience. But before I did that, I had to make sure I had an escape route.
Our speed was the same, but since I was much taller, I had longer legs. Longer legs meant faster running speed, right? This would be an especially useful experiment. If I ambushed them and things went badly, I could hopefully still escape. I kept my distance behind them, staying as quiet as I could, and decided to go after Goblin A first. If I could defeat Goblin A with a sneak attack before Goblin B got to me, then I could make it a one-on-one match.
I closed the distance. Goblin B had wandered a decent way off on its own. *When should I strike? This is terrifying… Okay, now!*
I took a deep breath, leapt forward, and struck it in the back of the head. It staggered and I struck again as it bent forward. My next swing knocked it off its feet. Once it was on the ground, I swung my stick as fast as I could before the other goblin returned. By the time Goblin B drew near, Goblin A had stopped moving altogether. *Even if it's still alive, it's out of the fight.*
The remaining goblin charged toward me swinging its club. Its body was low to the ground, so dodging the attack was harder than expected. I shifted out of the way and attacked with my stick.
The goblin's attacks were simple and predictable. It just swung with all its might every time.

I watched its attacks and quickly figured out how to read and respond—I waited for the swing, and then dodged and struck simultaneously. *A counterattack!* Every time the goblin attacked me, it took damage. It wouldn't last much longer.

Even though I was weak, my attacks were ferocious. I screamed and swung with all my force every time I dodged the goblin's club. After some time, I smashed its neck and prepared to dodge, but the goblin crumpled into a heap before it could swing the club down one more time.

Deep breaths—I stepped away and took a moment to catch my breath. Only one of the attacks had grazed me, but it didn't do any real damage. It wasn't a flawless victory, but not bad for my first fight to the death.

Neither of the defeated goblins were moving at all. Just to be safe, I went over and dealt each of them a coup de grâce, taking their clubs as my spoils of war. I washed my face in the river.

I felt more exhausted mentally than physically. By the time I defeated the second one, I was able to anticipate all the goblin's attacks perfectly. Not that I could read every movement they made, but I managed to respond smoothly—and just surviving my first battle felt like an accomplishment. I had a lot to work on, but my first priority was to get used to fighting.

Now I really feel like I'm in a fantasy game, I thought. Or is that just my imagination?

I went back to the cave and took a quick rest. I nibbled on roasted mushrooms and used the wood and vines I had gathered to make a simple lattice door over the cave entrance. I had some leftover lumber, so I dried it out with my Heat Magic and stacked it up for later use. *The bag of holding is really useful!*

With the woodworking I needed to do, Weight Magic came in handy. I could make the wood lighter and carry everything myself. *Even a loner can do it! Wait, I said I'm* not *a loner, right?*

Fighting sure worked up a sweat. I took a bath and started on laundry. I wasn't that out of shape, but I didn't like getting sweaty and I hated wearing dirty clothes. *Maybe I'm not actually cut out for living in the woods in a fantasy world.*

I got my first magic from the old dude, but I learned Fire Magic by myself. I had no idea how to practice my magic and get better, but obviously shooting fireballs would be a little more difficult than just saying a word and firing.

I kept messing around with Heat and Fire magic to try and get some flames going. Heat magic took forever to actually light anything on fire. I could create little balls of flame with Fire Magic, but they were tiny and only shot a few yards away. Even sending them that far took a lot of my concentration. It would be hard to find a use for them in actual combat. At least I was having fun, so I kept practicing.

I wanted to be able to attack from a distance, but I probably needed to level up more first. And in order to level up, I had to fight.

I tried using Weight Magic to make my stick heavier for battle, but it was pretty difficult. If I made it heavy too early, I could barely lift it, but when I tried making it heavy just at the moment of contact, it was hard to get the timing right. Still, I wasn't about to give up. *En garde!*

Then I tried using Packing Magic to pack up my wooden stick. I could do it no problem, but what was the point? There had to be some use for Packing Magic, but for the life of me I couldn't figure it out. In the meantime, I experimented with using it to bundle sticks together and then swing them all at once, but I honestly couldn't tell if this was any different from just using one. Either way, at least it was practice for my cane fighting.

It was hard to figure out what exactly Movement Magic did. I had the sense that maybe the Walking skill was increasing my stride so that what would normally have taken ten steps was only seven or eight. I remembered being surprised by how quickly I reached the goblin when I launched my surprise attack. Yep, the surprise attack surprised me, too. *Turns out I had a lot in common with that goblin*. I did whack it to death with a stick, but y'know. *I am a loner after all.*

Maybe I would get a new title when I leveled up, Klutz or something. It gives you extra power if you pratfall and shout in embarrassment during a life-or-death struggle with goblins, I thought. Yeah, that's definitely not my style.

What if I tried using Packing Magic on myself? As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I tried it out. It took a while at first, but soon I was able to do it quickly, and after a while I could pack myself up in a flash. It felt like an out-of-body experience, like I was my own disembodied porter, moving myself around like luggage.

Moving like that was easier than expected, and I could move pretty fast, too. Was the skill actually doing anything or was it just the placebo effect? *Am I using my calisthenics skill, too?* Either way, I thought packing myself might give me a defense or magic defense boost, so I had to try more experiments with it. I packed myself, moved forward, and attacked with my stick… It was like a game! *Though this seems better suited to one of those clumsy anime girls than me.*

I tried pretty much every trick I could come up with. I still had no clue how well any of my magic would work in a real battle.

I didn't know if it was physical exhaustion or using too much magic, but I started to get dizzy. That was enough messing around for one day. *Time to sleep.*

Before retiring for the night, I used Appraisal to check out the looted goblin clubs. The display read: "Club: A wooden club." The stick that I had been using had a big question mark for its description, so I couldn't compare it, but I could tell that the club was heavier, shorter, and probably useless in battle.

"Status," I called.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 02
JOB: —
HP: 23
MP: 0/21
VIT: 22
POW: 21
SPE: 25
DEX: 25
RES: 21
INT: 25
LUK: MAX (Above Limit)
SP: 05
COMBAT: Cane Mastery Lv2, Evasion Lv1, Foresight Lv1, Magic Infusion Lv1
MAGIC: Heat Lv2, Movement Lv1, Packing Lv1, Weight Lv1, Fire Lv1
SKILLS: General Health Lv1, Sensitivity Lv2, Calisthenics Lv2, Walking Lv1, Consultant Lv1, Servitude Lv1, Appraisal Lv2, Clairvoyance Lv1, Presence Detection Lv2, Enemy Tracking Lv2, Magic Manipulation Lv1,
TITLES: Shut-In Lv1, NEET Lv1, Loner Lv1
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv1, Master of None Lv1, Blockhead Lv1
EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Cloth Bag

I leveled up! My stats had all doubled, which was a much bigger jump than I'd expected. Maybe it was just because I was at such a low level, but I certainly wasn't going to complain about the fast growth. *This'll make fighting way easier,* I thought. *My speed and dexterity nearly tripled. Now I'll really be able to attack quickly.*

Maybe I was an agile build in this world? I had to be, if speed and dexterity increased so much, right?

The intelligence boost was also great, but I figured that came from all the time I spent practicing magic. Or maybe it was because I came up with a good strategy to defeat the goblins? *Could my time speed-running video games finally be paying off? Not that I ever finished a run.*

Wait a second—did my sensitivity go up, too?! What the hell did I do? All I did was encounter some goblins, and it's not like they captured and tormented me! So why did it go up? Was this good or bad? Did my skin get more sensitive or something? That sounded itchy and terrible.

I pretended that I hadn't noticed it and moved on. My Cane Mastery level had gone up just from swinging a stick around for one afternoon. Did I get a

bonus because I killed my first enemy? *In the past, didn't they give you a new rank in martial arts if you killed an opponent?*

I was supposed to have a slower level-up rate because of Master of None, but I guess those two goblins gave me enough experience points anyway? That would make sense, considering I defeated enemies that were a lot stronger than me. I had no idea what the base experience growth was. *I could really use a strategy guide, but I don't even know the name of this world.* Maybe the old geezer told me, but I couldn't remember. That good-for-nothing geezer.

My Calisthenics level must've gone up because of my strict daily exercise routine…*the one I just started today, I mean*. Could that possibly be enough? Maybe calisthenics was the first skill that a lot of people used in this world. And when you leveled it up enough, you were suddenly able to recite NHK's legendary radio exercise programs—even the hardest ones—on the spot? Besides that, my Appraisal, Presence Detection, and Enemy Tracking had all gone up, too. I used them constantly, and needed them in my daily life, so no big surprise there. I was just happy to level up.

I had no idea what "Magic Infusion" referred to. "Magic Manipulation" must've appeared because I was preparing myself to use Weight Magic in battle.

But Magic Infusion? Maybe I got it from using magic on myself earlier. But how was that different from Packing Magic?

My eyes couldn't stay open any more. I'll worry about it tomorrow. What would be the hardest radio exercise program of all time, anyway?

DAY 3
I am not a clumsy anime girl.
THE CAVE

I WOKE UP RAVENOUS. It was the first time that hunger forced me awake. Did using magic make me hungrier? No matter the reason, I had to eat.
Ugh, mushrooms again. I got a fire going, chopped them up, and sprinkled them over a salad of herbs. *This could really use some dressing*. The herbs were medicinal and bitter—they really needed something. *It's not too much to hope they have mayo here, is it?* But the only ingredient around was mushrooms. This world was definitely not weird enough for mushroom-based mayonnaise.
Eating woke me up all the way. I washed my face—this is a ridiculous order for a morning routine, but I'm in another world after all, and a loner on top of that. No one's gonna tell me what order to do stuff in!
I leveled up yesterday, so all of my stats were double, but I didn't feel any stronger or faster. Maybe I was still too low level to feel any difference. I didn't really know how much I could trust stats, anyway.
I'll do whatever I can to get stronger. If I went looking for weak monsters I might find some, but if I ran into some strong monsters first, I was pretty sure I wouldn't respawn.
Yesterday, what happened yesterday? Right, somehow I got Magic Infusion. I could understand Evasion and Foresight. Magic Infusion needed testing.
And infuse what? Was magic going into my bloodstream, like a drug? What the hell did it mean?
Okay, Mr. Appraisal, tell me what you got.
"Magic Infusion Lv1: Cloaks the wielder's body in magical power and enhances it. Increases physical strength, physical defense, and magical defense."
Now that was a killer package deal! Fantasy world moms would go wild for a value set like that.
If I could get all this stuff on my own, the old geezer shouldn't have even bothered with the long list of skills. Weren't the abilities I got from him just holding me back?
If I applied this ability to my current stats, I should be considerably stronger than a level 2 character. But how much stronger?
I hadn't gotten the hang of Movement Magic, either. I could potentially use it to launch hit-and-run attacks, but I always just ended up crashing into something and squealing as I tumbled head over heels. I was no better than a clumsy anime girl!
Clearly, the best use of my time was getting better at magic. *Practice, practice, practice.*

I tried out Magic Infusion. Didn't cost much MP, powerful, and probably delicious. *Man, I'm hungry.*
I also remembered that after getting Appraisal Lv2, a lot of the items in my inventory had a new question mark added next to them: Wooden Stick? Clothes Set? Leather Glove? Leather Boots? Cloak? Contact Lenses? What was up with that?
Shouldn't leveling up take the question marks away? Was I regressing? *Get better, stupid skills!* Despite using Appraisal on anything I didn't know, I knew even less than before!
My brain was starting to overload. I had to get my day started. *Let's go already!*
Mushrooms, the blessings of this forest… Isn't there literally anything else?! How about a meat tree? It's a forest, after all!
Was this even a real forest? Did they replace all the bamboo with mushrooms to stop a war over chocolate bamboo snacks? Was I summoned here to end the terrible Chocolate Snack War? I could have settled that debate. Chocolate snacks were delicious whether they were shaped like mushrooms or bamboo shoots. *I could really go for either…*
I was just so sick of eating mushrooms.
I tested out Magic Infusion by activating it and running around. I definitely felt a little faster. It felt like my body acted before I even thought about it. My reflexes were sharper, and they would probably get better as I leveled up. Would I have to get used to how my body moved whenever I leveled up? *I'm not gonna hit a plateau, right?*
I picked up my stick and idly swung it around. It felt so light! I tried reenacting my fight yesterday, and for lack of a better word, I felt awesome. Even an onlooker would surely be impressed by how much better I looked. Too bad the goblins were too dead to share their opinions, so I kept practicing alone.
I gave Movement Magic another shot but immediately fell over with a crash. *Uh, let's just keep that a secret.*
It seemed like monsters avoided the river for some reason, but I saw a few deeper in the forest: another group of two, like yesterday. That was fine, but if I couldn't separate them, there was a good chance I'd have to fight while outnumbered.
They were level 9 and 11. *A little strong,* I thought.
I rushed in with a fast attack, closing the distance between us in an instant. I attacked from the flanks and backed off as quickly as I approached. I saw the first goblin reel and collapse right away. *Did I just knock it out in a single blow? Ha, get wrecked!*
I easily ducked under the second goblin's attack. The momentum of the goblin's swing left it facing away from me. I struck a blow to the creature's back and dashed away in a flash. Looking back cautiously at the battle scene, I studied my surroundings.
Did I win?

No “KO!” text popped up, and a victory fanfare didn’t play. *Come on, give me a sign that you’re really dead!*

That went way better than yesterday. I didn’t know if I’d gotten used to fighting, if my level up helped a lot, or if it was the Magic Infusion, and it’d be way too much of a pain to figure out which. Being stronger was good enough for me. *Goblins? No problem!* But other monsters were still as mysterious to me as food that wasn’t mushrooms.

The Magic Infusion might as well have had a question mark next to it. There was no doubt that it made me stronger, I just didn’t really understand how.

I wasn’t tired, either. The next two goblins I saw were level 7 and 8. One hit each. The ones further upstream and nearer to the river bank tended to be weak, it seemed. In that case, would going downstream into the forest lead to stronger goblins? The goblins were always on the move, so I couldn’t be sure. I needed a strategy. Movement patterns, strategies, I was figuring things out. I would definitely ace the AP Goblin Slaying final. Not that I planned on taking exams ever again.

I made my way deeper into the forest. I fought a level 13 and a level 10. Even the level 13 went down after a surprise attack and a finishing blow. I’d gotten pretty damn strong, though I didn’t know if I was ready to face three at once yet. *That’s enough for today,* I decided.

On the way back to my cave, I took out a level 11 and a level 10. *The weaker ones definitely stay closer to the river, so as long as I stick to my hunting ground I should be safe.* In terms of raw strength, I might lose to a level 10+ goblin. I developed a three-step routine to fight these hardier goblins: sneak attack, a quick strike, dodge, and then circle behind for a final blow. I had to put all of my energy into that final blow or it wouldn’t kill them. I still had to worry about getting hit, too—just one and it would all be over. I needed to figure out Movement Magic if I wanted to really mow them down.

W*hy the hell am I just beating them up with a stick?* I thought. *I’m an unemployed loner in a world of swords and sorcery*. *How could I be satisfied with just a stick? There are vicious monsters around!*

Grumbling to myself, I made my way out of the forest. Back in the cave, I sighed over my dinner options. *Mushrooms, again*. *Bon appétit…*

I piled up the firewood and timber in the deepest part of the cave. It was just a bunch of wood that I felled and dried out with magic. *If I had a crafting ability, maybe I could make furniture.* In addition, I had collected a bunch of clubs. It wasn’t like I could use them, but I added them to my Bag of Holding anyway. I didn’t have any armor or anything; I couldn’t afford to get careless.

I took a bath, set up my tent, and lay down to sleep. The hard cave floor hurt to sleep on. I pulled out the sleeping bag. *Even a loner wishes for the pleasure of a big fluffy bed.*

I was still level 2—leveling up wouldn’t be that easy and fast. I need to keep testing my skills, I thought. Training, battling monsters, leveling up, seeing what works. I’ll discover my own fighting style through trial and error.

The only thing I could do was ensure that I got stronger a little at a time. This was a fantasy world—I knew there had to be more exciting skills and weapons out there. *This world is too damn realistic!*

That's enough, that's enough. Realism in a fantasy world wasn't necessarily a bad thing—at least I had some idea of what to expect. Maybe that's why they dragged a bunch of high school kids into it right before an exam—they wanted us to display some real world knowledge. If so, our class was doomed.

Magic Infusion was definitely proving itself useful. Leveling up and practicing were helping, too. Taking on goblins was no problem anymore, even by myself. I didn't need to join someone else's party.

While I did defeat that level 13 goblin, it was pretty challenging, and there had to be much stronger monsters out there. Even if it took a long time, I had to keep working to keep my skills sharp.

I just needed a trump card. I was fast enough to attack and retreat and control the pace of a battle, but these fights were still dangerous. Movement Magic was probably the trump card I needed.

Yeah, that's right, I should practice Movement before going to sleep…

"Ouch! My head! Ow, ow, ow!" This is going to be harder than I thought.

My Walking skill was now level 2. I assumed that meant I could walk faster and farther, which meant that Movement Magic would be even harder to use. *My poor head! Just go to sleep! At least I don't have Klutz…at least not officially.*

DAY 4
I'll keep sneaking around!
THE CAVE

I WOKE UP on the floor. *First breakfast, then tracking.* I went upstream—not because I was feeling *up*-beat. No, I was down in the dumps. I just wanted to eat something other than mushrooms. Rice, ramen…nothing fancy, *anything* that wasn't mushrooms would be fine.

I used my Enemy Tracking skill from the riverside as I walked along; I was still afraid to wade too far into the river. Mushrooms, mushrooms everywhere, and not another food in sight. *Goblins ahead!* They were apparently more numerous upstream, but they were still total wimps. I could fight them easily.

Goblins found with presence detection! There were two of them, levels 12 and 11. With Movement Magic and Magic Infusion, I launched my attack. I struck the first one and knocked it over in one blow—but I had too much momentum! I crashed into it as I attacked, a seriously klutzy move. Untangling myself from the first goblin, I hurried to the second. The goblin looked as shocked as I was! I powered up my stick with Magic Infusion, dodged its first attack, and whacked it. The goblin was out for the count in two hits.

I was feeling strong. I wondered about potential drawbacks to these abilities. *Best not look a gift horse in the mouth*. I wondered if gift horses were edible. They had to taste better than mushrooms.

I continued up the river, still using Enemy Tracking. I was desperate for something besides mushrooms. This time, I ran into three goblins, levels 14, 11, and 10. I used Movement and Magic Infusion for a quick attack, and one-shot killed the first goblin. I ended up flying past it and falling over, but at least I had some space between me and the goblins. *Now a quick attack on the second goblin…yikes!* It landed a counterattack on me! I just couldn't get the hang of Movement yet, so I quickly withdrew. Now the third one was getting closer. I dodged its attack, used Movement, and dodged again before finally taking it out*. A real melee.*

If I can wound it, victory is mine, I reflected. Movement helps get me in close, but if I can't control it, it's a double-edged sword. A double-edged stick?

I had to focus on practicing Movement until I could control it. I could use Magic Infusion without concentrating on it, but Movement was still an issue. *Don't tell anyone that I went flying twice—not that there's anyone to tell.*

I had taken an unexpected amount of damage, so I rushed back to the cave. There was the damage from the goblin's attack, the damage from crashing into the first goblin, and the damage from falling over. *I was a suicide*

bomber. No, not even that, a literal suicide bomb. I couldn't check my level right now, but that last goblin had taken a while. It had a bracelet of some sort, so I grabbed it. *Last seen on foot, suspect is considered armed and dangerous,* I thought. *Suspected of…robbery? Larceny? Being a murder-hobo?* I was probably guilty of at least one of those.

After getting back to the cave I ate a late lunch. I used Appraisal to check my level and found it had gone up! My intelligence was already 40, with everything else in the mid-30s. *This means I should be way stronger than all those goblins,* I thought. *So why did the last one cause me so much trouble?*

I remembered the bracelet. I took it out and checked its description.

"Magic Bracelet: Enhances power. POW +1%."

Better than nothing, so I put it on. I wasn't a monster, but I needed all the help I could get.

It was evening before I knew it. My stamina was fully restored, so before it got dark I went back upstream. I could check out all of my stats just before going to bed. Even though there were mostly weak goblins upstream, and not even that many, I could feel the presence of something different. I hid in the forest and crept along in silence.

Using Clairvoyance, I sensed…people. Six guys. When I got closer, I recognized my classmates. They were a group of irritating wannabe delinquent kids who liked to bully the nerds but never did anything scarier than that. Unsurprisingly, they were making a racket.

From my hiding spot in the trees, I used Appraisal. I was too far away to see anything besides their levels and jobs: Longsword Fighter level 11, Dual-Swords Fighter level 3, and Fire Mage level 2. *Why such a big gap in level?*

I decided to keep hidden and observe them for a bit. They were all sitting by the river, talking. I approached close enough to hear their conversation, but it was a bunch of drivel. They were debating the hotness of girls in our class. Out of the forty-two people in our class, twenty were girls, and the delinquents were going off about how awful it was that so many of them were geeks. *Still, the geeks are the ones best equipped to succeed here,* I thought. It sounded like the popular mean girls' clique was on bad terms with the rest of the girls.

These six bullies were up to no good. The leader was Katsuyama, the longsword fighter. He was going on about the nasty stuff he wanted to do with the girls. *But which one taught them about using skills in this world? Hmm…probably Tanaka.*

They hatched a plan to ambush some of the girls, but it sounded like our Class Rep would be there. She'd definitely see through their plan and stop them. She had been dealing with them since first grade, after all.

Huh? The six guys clearly haven't noticed me, but I feel like there's something else here. I snuck away from the group, but I couldn't find anyone else. Well, there's no point in getting involved, so I'll just head back.

At least I knew that all my classmates were upstream, so I could avoid them. Meeting up with them would defeat the point of leading a loner life.

I made it back to the cave before it got dark, beating two goblins along the way. I couldn't tell if the magic bracelet and the +1% power had an effect, but I had gotten better at concealing myself and easily snuck up on them. It was good practice. Then, as I continued to sneak my way back, I encountered a rabbit—the first animal I had seen! *Does that mean I can only find animals while hidden?* I caught the rabbit, and it appeared in my inventory alongside the mushrooms. It would be my first proper dinner in ages.

I cooked and devoured the rabbit. It was delicious. How many days had I gone without fresh meat? Of course, I still had mushrooms on the side, but they were tolerable as a side dish. Mushrooms had been cast as the main character too often lately. What's worse, they were doing solo performances.

Now should I practice magic or make some furniture? I needed to keep experimenting. I tried using Packing Magic on the cave earth, whacking it with my stick, extending it. Making it denser, denting it, raising it up, making it into a shape. I ended up having so much fun playing around that I lost track of time. It was late at night.

I pulled up my stats.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 03
JOB: —
HP: 35
MP: 4/32
VIT: 37
POW: 35
SPE: 38
DEX: 38
RES: 36
INT: 40
LUK: MAX (Above Limit)
SP: 18
COMBAT SKILLS: Cane Mastery Lv2, Evasion Lv2, Foresight Lv2, Magic Infusion Lv2
MAGIC: Heat Lv2, Movement Lv1, Packing Lv1, Weight Lv1, Fire Lv1, Earth Lv1
SKILLS: General Health Lv1, Sensitivity Lv2, Calisthenics Lv2, Walking Lv2, Servitude Lv1, Appraisal Lv3, Clairvoyance Lv1, Presence Detection Lv2, Enemy Tracking Lv2, Magic Manipulation Lv1, Presence Concealment Lv1, Stealth Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv2, NEET Lv1, Loner Lv2
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv1, Master of None Lv1, Blockhead Lv1

EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Bag of Holding, Monster Bracelet Power +1%

My Shut-In and Loner levels had gone up. Was that because I didn't try to interact with my classmates? Because I'd been having plenty of fun by myself? If my NEET level had gone up too I might have started screaming. Those were some savage titles.

And Earth Magic? I must've gotten that when I was trying to use Packing Magic on the cave floor—but did that really count as Earth Magic? I guess if cooking mushrooms was enough to earn me Fire Magic, packing some dirt would be enough for Earth Magic. Magic was a piece of cake in this world.

Being careful when I was sneaking around seemed to be fruitful. Presence Concealment and Stealth were great skills to have. Now I could sneak up on and take out goblins no problem, like a pro assassin! Well, I was unemployed by definition, but still, I felt like a professional. *I'll keep sneaking around tomorrow and get those levels up,* I thought.

I feel like I'm living an honest, stable life here. There's nothing flashy like in a novel. No one would ever be like "I'll sneak more tomorrow!" in a real fantasy story.

But that's just what I was going to do! Probably! Definitely!

DAY 5

What kind of town would be interested in buying a ton of goblin clubs?

THE CAVE

H*ELLO THERE, Goblin, a pleasure to meet you in this mushroom-filled forest! I killed it. Goodbye, Mr. Goblin!*

That's pretty much how it went as I walked through the forest. Mushroom, mushroom, goblin, mushroom, mushroom, goblin, mushroom, mushroom, goblin, goblin. *To hell with this!* Even when I looked around with Appraisal, there was nothing to eat besides mushrooms and some herbs, and then a bunch of goblins—but no, even I wouldn't eat goblins!

That rabbit was delicious, but I didn't have any ranged weapons or magic to make hunting them easier. I could conceal my presence with Stealth, approach, and pounce. Presence Concealment and Stealth were coming in handy. They were way better than the skills that the old geezer foisted on me, so why even bother with the white room? Was there any point? Next time I saw him, he would have a lot to answer for.

"Mushroom, mushroom, oh, a goblin."

I became so used to goblins that I was worried I'd start liking them. I didn't want that to get in the way of bludgeoning them to death for experience. They were stupid and barely noticed when I snuck up on them with Presence Concealment and Stealth. They couldn't even react to my surprise attacks. They just held their clubs like idiots.

Surprise attack, a brutal bludgeoning, on to the next. I couldn't stop moving or get dragged into a drawn-out exchange of blows. I kept repeating my fast attack strategy, and gathered more mushrooms and the occasional herb.

Yeah, I definitely don't need to get involved with those delinquents, I thought. There weren't many goblins near the cave, but the ones I did find there were strong, between level 10 and 15. I couldn't kill the level 15 ones in one hit unless I put all my strength behind my swing.

In the forest, there were a lot more goblins, but they were weaklings, mostly under level 10. Oh, and more mushrooms. Yay.

I occasionally heard the sound of a bird overhead. *I could really go for some grilled chicken skewers.* I didn't have any way to attack from a distance, though. When I greedily looked up at the flying potential-kebabs, I realized for the first time that the trees of this forest bore fruit. Fruit was edible. *At long last, I'm free of the mushroom curse!*

Thank god for these contacts, I thought. Even in the darkness beneath the trees I could see tiny objects. Good vision was a blessing. If they sold contacts like these back in the real world, I would definitely wear them. They didn't fix my face, but whatever.

I climbed up the tree, grabbed a fruit, and tasted it. *It's sweet.* A little tart, but it was the first sweet flavor I had tasted in what felt like ages. I didn't have a sweet tooth or anything, but given how limited my food options were in this world, it tasted delicious. *It's making me nostalgic,* I thought. They were small and not especially filling, but I decided to pick as many as I could. *These won't ruin my svelte figure, will they?*

Besides that, I encountered more mushrooms and goblins, goblins and mushrooms, and last but not least mushrooms and mushrooms and goblins. *Enough! Think of all the suffering they're bringing to this world—my suffering!*

I couldn't find any more strong goblins anywhere, and I had too many clubs to count in my bag. Maybe I could sell them in a town? What kind of town would be interested in buying a ton of goblin clubs?

I'm losing focus. At this rate, I was going to make a mistake. Just one thwack to the face would still mean certain death. I was getting a lot better at using Movement, but if I couldn't focus, I would simply go flying. Crashing face-first into a goblin's club would be a good way to get myself killed.

"All right, time to go home," I said aloud. "Wait, am I thinking of that cave as home now?"

Regardless, I retraced my way to the cave. More goblins and mushrooms, mushrooms and goblins. *If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. Well, life's giving me mushrooms, so I'll make the most delicious mushrooms the world has ever tasted!* The big problem was that my only other ingredient was salt.

Once I got back home, I felt all tension leave my body. A side effect of being a shut-in, maybe? If this keeps up, I won't be able to leave the cave at all.

In most light novels, when you use up all your magic, your MP and your magic skills improved. That was why I used my magic to heat up my dinner. "Now I've got more dried mushrooms than I'll ever need. Next, I should use Earth Magic to make a stone grill."

I kept refurbishing my cave and practicing my magic, and eventually felt tired enough to sleep. I always fell asleep after exhausting my MP, so I was getting really good sleep in this world. *Why was I brought to a world without beds?*

I'd been summoned to a forest full of mushrooms, goblins, and nothing else. Was I summoned to protect a world from the looming threat of mushrooms and goblins? Could this be all the world had to offer me? Mushrooms, goblins, game over?

Shouldn't a forest be a treasure trove of ingredients? Why was it only a mushroom trove? I didn't know if there was something off about the vegetation or if this forest was just weird. I was getting comfortable here, but maybe other places would have better food options. With a shudder, I realized that if I stayed here, I'd have to live the rest of my life on mushrooms alone.

What to do? Even without going back into the woods, I had enough mushrooms to last a lifetime. Going out only meant more mushrooms. I was on my way to becoming an extreme shut-in. At this rate, I was destined to be the ultimate loner.

DAY 6
No, definitely no cliff edges for me.
THE CAVE

FIRST, tidying my house! I mean, my cave.
Next up, inspecting and maintaining my weapon! In this case, “polishing my stick” isn’t what you think.
After that, repairing my armor! I guess you could call that “doing the laundry.”
I had a lot to chew on over breakfast—both mushrooms and plans. Another uneventful morning of sautéed mushrooms and goblin hunting. They were even showing up in my dreams now. *Am I falling in love with them now? Nooooo!*
I wasn’t leveling up anymore, either. That must’ve been caused by Master of None and Blockhead. Neither seemed to have any positives. Master of None must have prevented me from focusing on any single skill, so they didn’t level fast. However, it was also probably responsible for how easy it was to acquire new skills?
Blockhead was a much bigger problem. I thought about the dictionary definition of the word. It referred to a puppet with a wooden block for its head. It also meant an incompetent idiot. So I was like an idiot puppet dancing on strings controlled by someone else.
No matter how you phrased it, it was all negative. Maybe Appraisal could help me figure it out once I had it at a high enough level, but I wasn’t sure it would level up at all anymore.
There was also Corporate Proactiveness, which didn’t seem bad, just useless. “Skilled at reporting, contacting, and consulting others.” I was a loner, though, so there was no point stressing over skills I would never use.
At least General Health and Calisthenics were useful. After concluding my morning exercise routine, I went hunting again.
As usual, there were no goblins by the riverbank. *Do they not drink water?*
Somewhere along the way I’d picked up the skill Map, which allowed me to see my current location and places I’d explored before on a map. For now, I decided to fill in the blank parts. Just to stay safe, I decided to stick to the river at first.
I was living by that river, but I didn’t have a rod or fishing net. Staring at those delicious-looking fish, I chewed on my mushrooms. If I went too far up the river, I’d run into those wannabe delinquents again. Nothing good would come from running into them; they were nothing but loads of trouble. They were a bunch of blowhards, so I wasn’t that worried about getting into a fight with them, despite how annoying I found them. But that old man had given them powerful skills, and they were the type of people who, if you asked them to hold a gun, wouldn’t be able to resist shooting it.

I continued exploring the forest, occasionally clobbering the goblins I encountered.

I was in a world of swords and sorcery, so where was all the drama and intrigue? It's not like I wanted to get chased to the edge of a cliff or anything, but at least that would mean something was happening! *Definitely not cliffs—I always hated it when novels ended on a cliffhanger.*

There were plenty of types of mushrooms with all sorts of different effects—restore HP, restore MP—but nothing awesome like mushrooms of giant growth. Not that I needed anything like that. I could shoot fireballs without a fire flower, after all.

Some mushrooms were poisonous. I had an antidote, but would it work? Even without Appraisal, no one would be dumb enough to eat these extremely poisonous-looking mushrooms.

I had gone pretty far upstream, but the goblins weren't getting any stronger. Any goblins under level 10 I could kill with my first blow. I was pretty strong! When there were a lot of them, I could repeat my quick attack. My reflexes were fast, and I wasn't particularly anxious, but my nerves started to get frayed if I didn't take breaks. It was a little early, but I wanted to head back. Today was just a dull day. No level-ups, either. *Was I actually leveling down instead?* Yep, time to go back.

I just wanted something to make me excited about this place, like a thunderbolt attack or an inferno spell. Would it be too much to ask for a cute female companion or the attention of a beautiful goddess or something? I wasn't even summoned to this world by a princess, just some senile old man! I couldn't even look at any of the cute girls from my class, since I was a loner; they were who-knows-where! Screw this game!

By the time I got back to the cave, it was almost dusk. My MP was full, so I crafted some furniture and cooked some mushrooms. I was basically playing Minecraft at this point.

I'm starting to lose it. I'm talking to myself more. Worse, I'm trash-talking myself. Before too long, I'll be slapping myself on the back and flicking myself in the forehead.

"It's not like I'm asking for cheat codes or anything…"

Grumbling to myself, I glanced at my status. My Earth Magic had leveled up from making all the furniture.

I couldn't decide if I gave up on the game before it even started, or if the game had given up on me. I was probably just doomed from the outset. Whoever said "winners never quit" never played this game.

There seemed to be no escape from my life as a goblin slayer. I had way too many clubs to even count. Maybe I could trade them for some fish? *I want fish so badly right now…*

DAY 7

It was a story full of resentment, ugliness, and cruelty, with no kindness at all.

THE CAVE

SINCE IT WAS a cave, my home filtered out all noise from outside. Just to be extra safe, I set Presence Detection when I went to sleep. Still, I couldn't be certain it was working until there was a presence to detect.

As soon as I set it on, I immediately detected something very loud coming from the forest. There was no way I could sleep through that racket. I went outside to tell whoever it was to shut up. *Some of us are trying to get some sleep around here!* They sounded like a biker gang. Then I heard something that sounded like an alarm.

I used Clairvoyance and detected geeks and goblins. Since when were nerds the kinds of people to party all night with goblins? I needed to go lecture them about the role of nerds in a functioning society.

As I drew near, I could hear some of their shouts.

"Fall back!"

"I'll take it!"

"You still out of MP?"

"Yeah! You too?!"

The nerds were flustered as the slavering, howling goblins attacked them. Why'd they have to be so damn loud?

It was four of my classmates. They weren't bad guys, just hardcore geeks who got bullied all the time. I thought about charging in and telling them to keep it down. But something wasn't adding up. They had all those overpowered cheat skills, and as huge fantasy manga nerds, they should've been experts on how to survive in fantasy worlds. Why were they being so noisy?

What if they see me as an enemy? I knew that in a lot of light novels, bullied kids who were summoned to another world took the opportunity to get revenge on their bullies. But it's not like I was one of the bullies—the nerds had always recommended books and games to me. Should I return the favor by helping them out?

I moved closer and used Appraisal. There were five goblins, levels 13 to 15. *Huh? They should be fine then.* They were all level 16, and had awesome classes like Guardian, Ninja, Saint, and Sorcerer. *Dammit, why am I the only one without a cool class!*

The Guardian was tanking the goblins with a large shield and a spear while the Ninja launched one attack at a time before retreating behind the Guardian. Behind them, the Sorcerer and the Saint attacked with magic. They should've been fine, but there were a lot of enemies, and I noticed that the Ninja in particular seemed slow to move—he was likely injured. The

Sorcerer and the Saint were out of MP and had to switch to melee attacks using a spear and hammer.
Still, they were level 16, so this fight should have been a piece of cake. *I could handle those goblins at level 3*. Were they just too tired? One of them was obviously out of shape.
“All right, time to end them with one more hit!”
“Get them together in one place!”
“Roger!”
“Earth Lance!”
Wow, he killed three with that one attack. I was way more tense watching them fight then I was in my own battles.
“Only two left! Surround them!”
“Hyaaaah!”
What are they even trying to do? Why was I getting a bad feeling? They exhausted their MP again, and the Guardian seemed totally worn out. Two more goblins were charging from behind, and none of them seemed to notice.
The nerds were freaking out even more than usual, like total histrionics.
All four of them are at level 16, and they still can’t handle some goblins? A friggin’ Sorcerer and Saint and Guardian and Ninja? Why does a level 3 unemployed loner have to bail them out? At level 10+ you should be able to take out a whole squadron of goblins in a flash! I didn’t have a choice.
“Stick Attack!” I charged from behind and felled the two goblins in quick succession. “You guys all right?”
All four of them shouted in unison, “What the heck? Is that you, Haruka-kun?”
Most of them looked completely panicked. One just looked confused.
I looked back, wondering what their deal was. I had to help them—I couldn’t just let them die or get injured without lifting a finger. We weren’t really friends, more like acquaintances. We only interacted in class, when they would interrupt my reading to give me a whole spiel about what light novels they recommended.
Despite their combined otaku expertise, they’d needed my backup. While they struggled with one, I had been able to take out two goblins with one hit each. I liked to call it my One-Hit KO Back-of-the-Head Blow. So what if the name of the attack was longer than the attack itself? Who asked you?
Two goblins remained, groaning and leering at us. I had no idea what they were saying. I hadn’t learned to speak goblin, but I doubted it was something friendly like “What’s up” or the like.
If the nerds couldn’t handle them, I didn’t exactly want to show all the aces up my sleeve.
While I was considering our situation, the goblins raised their clubs and charged. *They always attack the same way!* It was easy to dodge. I liked to call this one Dashing the Goblin’s Brains Out When It Slams Its Club Down.
A top secret technique.

“Hey, you nerds alive?”
No response. I turned around.
They were all standing there in shocked silence. “Oh, you know, we’re…just dandy!” one of them said.
All but one of them seemed to have crashed. I can’t just keep saying “All but one” though. How should I tell them apart? Do I need a skill for this?
“There’s a lot I want to ask, but first of all, thank you,” the one said.
“Thank you so much!” the rest chanted.
Okay, they managed to reboot. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d talked to other people. Even back in the real world, some days went by without me uttering a single word. *Don’t call me a loner…*
Were they waiting for me to say something? I went through all the trouble of saving them, why did I have to talk, too?
“Are you okay?” I asked. “Is there something dangerous near us?”
“Something dangerous?”
“What, like monsters?”
“A survival game?”
What a wild guess. That one did lend me a book about a game where people gambled away their lives, though.
“Wrong genre, this is a fantasy world!”
I might have made things awkward. I didn’t mean to imply there was danger lurking nearby. With their skills, they were supposed to be the dangerous ones. I was the weirdo stuck with worthless skills like General Health and Walking! *Why me? Why me?*
I remembered that someone must have taken the skill Puppetry. Whoever had that was definitely trouble for me. They would have had no trouble puppeteering a Blockhead. Maybe I could trick whoever had that skill to trade it for Blockhead?
The nerds glanced at each other and started taking all their equipment off and placing it on the ground. *That’s a great idea, just disarm right here,* I thought. Not that I had room to criticize; I was trying to survive while only able to wield a stick…
“Bad idea, this forest is too dangerous,” I said. They gathered their weapons.
“Is that so?”
“It doesn’t seem that bad.”
“He must be right.”
“We’ll do as you see fit, milord.”
I’m not your lord! I’m unemployed! These nerds even started talking like we’re in a fantasy world. While they were picking up their equipment, I tried asking them a few questions.
“What happened to everyone else? Are you the class’s night watch?”
The four grimaced. Their voices were frantic.
“Well, they left us behind.”
“We got separated.”

“Those stupid…”
“We ran away!”
Then all four of them at once: “We’re on the run!”
I knew these guys were bullied at school, but were they really being bullied here, too?
They were completely worn out, so I brought them back to my cave. Their wounds needed treatment, so I splashed the cuts and bruises with a potion I concocted out of boiled mushrooms and herbs. It was my first clinical trial. In conclusion: mushroom stink.
“Your cave is so stylish!” one cried.
“You did this all on your own?”
“We’ve spent the past week all crammed in one tent…”
“This is like a fancy countryside retreat!”
Enough with reminding me that I’m alone, I know I’m a loner! Everyone is banned from saying that word, by the way. This wasn’t exactly the countryside, either. I lived more like a hermit in the boonies.
It was true, though. The cave was much nicer than when I got there. It was originally jagged and uneven, but I’d used Packing Magic to smooth out the floor and walls. That’s how I learned Earth Magic, which I used to revamp the cave into a massive room. I thought maybe my Earth Magic would level up, but Shut-In and Loner leveled up instead. *Of course, just that stuff.*
The nerd squad burbled with excitement.
“It’s like a modern warehouse!”
“I can’t imagine living by myself with this much space!”
“All four of us…in one tent…for a week.”
“An upscale loft?”
All four of them in unison: “Awesome!!”
All their chatter was beginning to irritate me, so I brought them some juice I had made from those little mystery fruits I collected earlier to shut them up. It was a suspicious dark color, but they drank it all up without a hint of trepidation.
“This is delicious!” they shouted.
“Huh, there was fruit in this forest after all?”
They loved it, and they didn’t immediately keel over. *Juice experiment: triumphant success.* I tried asking them what in the world they’d been doing in the forest for the past week.
Their response was a lot to take in. A lot of stupid stuff—not because of them, but because of everyone else.
They took a long time to fill me in on everything that happened. It was a story full of resentment, ugliness, and cruelty, with no kindness at all.
All of my other classmates were summoned into the forest at the same time. There were forty-two of them. *I can’t even remember any of their names.*
Apparently, the old dude’s explanations didn’t sit well with the class. Chaos erupted. No surprises there, especially the typical behavior from the wannabe delinquents and the mean girls.

First, the wannabe delinquents started swinging swords around and shooting spells everywhere, and when they finally stopped, everyone else got mad and attacked them. The mean girls kept moaning about how they didn't know what was going on and demanding that everyone else fix things and make them comfortable.

The normal girls burst into tears. The sports club guys got into a huddle and ignored everyone else. The regular guys just blended into the background. Only the Class Rep was completely unfazed, even when they were transported to the middle of the forest.

In the meantime, the nerds had totally guilelessly exchanged all the information they'd gathered about their stats, abilities, equipment, and spells.

And of course, because of all the ruckus, a bunch of monsters attacked. Goblins swarmed in from every direction and even the Class Rep freaked out. *Even she has her limits,* I thought.

The mean girls shouted at the guys to protect them. The wannabe delinquents, who had been swinging their swords around and screaming up until then, froze up as soon as the monsters appeared. *The morons!* The regular guys stayed little more than extras in the background.

In the midst of the chaos, the nerds—who had often dreamt of being sent to a fantasy world—easily adapted to the situation and managed to drive the goblins back. Soon, the jocks joined the fray. With their help, the battle was won. After that, the Class Rep somehow managed to get the unruly mob of students to listen to her. She directed everyone to head to the river bank as it was probably less dangerous.

As they marched, the nerds gathered mushrooms and foraged for food. Even though most of my classmates were annoying and totally useless, it sounded like somehow, they all made it there safely.

Everyone was quiet. Either they had learned the hard way to shut up or they were just exhausted. The evening passed by in relative quiet. The nerds lit campfires, set up tents, and even cooked dinner for everyone.

It sounded like the nerds had practiced survival skills regularly back home just in case they were ever summoned to another world. Just how ridiculous can you get? They really did think they were living in a manga.

Class Rep kept everyone in line and helped set up the campsite while the nerds taught their classmates how to pitch their tents. The nerds went overboard with their own camp preparations without even consulting her—they hadn't been ostracized, they just didn't think to collaborate with anyone. *Typical.*

The Sorcerer made a fence and moat around the camp using Earth Magic and his survival abilities. The Ninja went out on reconnaissance, set traps for goblins, and managed to take a few out. The Saint cured the injured and sick with his healing magic, and the Guardian patrolled the camp and kept the campfires burning. They eliminated any goblins that approached. *These guys are intense!*

Fortunately, the surrounding goblins were all weaklings, and everyone gradually settled down and started discussions. They set up a rotation for the night watch, planned their next steps, and thought about how to get food. Class Rep asked the nerds for their input and came up with her own ideas. Issues were raised and dealt with, one by one. *If I ever see her again, I'll have to address her as Her Royal Class Rep-ness.*

But, as expected, something went wrong and the wannabe delinquents were to blame.

The mean girls made a fuss first because they were having trouble setting up their tent by themselves. Class Rep offered to help, but they declined. They were hoping some cute guys would offer to do it for them.

"We never wanted to come here!"

"Dinner was gross! Make it again!"

"Get us out of here!"

They whined about everything under the sun. Before too long, the wannabe delinquents decided they would go on strike, insisting that the nerds should have to do all the work themselves. When the Class Rep tried to intervene, they started threatening her and acting violent.

It was only a matter of time. The camp had split into factions—and fallen into chaos.

Obviously, they couldn't keep it together for long. A bunch of dumb high school sophomores, without even a teacher to keep them in line, were suddenly plunged into life and death struggles with literal monsters.

Even the Class Rep, who was a born leader, couldn't handle it all by herself. She must've understood that. No sixteen-year-old girl could've kept control in a situation that crazy.

"That's it. I give up," she'd said, hanging her head in defeat. Everything fell apart.

So, from then on, nothing was decided, and no one knew what to do. So there they were, unwilling to cooperate even if it was a matter of survival. For the first time in their lives, they couldn't get what they wanted just by complaining loud enough.

They had no established rules, and even their factions fell apart. They were just forty-two individuals with dangerous, overpowered skills.

They may have been low level, but they were still formidable. They didn't know how to use their abilities, how to fight, or what kinds of dangers lurked in this world—and yet, they all bickered amongst themselves instead of cooperating.

The best possibility for survival would have been under the leadership of the Class Rep and the guidance of the nerds. The camp was doomed from the moment that the Class Rep gave up. But I couldn't blame her.

The nerds had no interpersonal skills, obviously, but they still fought monsters, protected the camp, and distributed food. It was all for nothing, but they'd done it anyway.

I couldn’t sit and listen anymore. “I’ve heard enough! It’s freaking depressing. So did you guys just run away after that?”
Long story short, the nerds were overwhelmed by the amount of idiocy, complaints, and insults around them, so they took off. That was how they ended up in my abode, ready to eat Fantasy Food Surprise with Mystery Herb Garnish. Surprise, it’s mushrooms again!
“But that’s not why we really ran away. It’s because of what happened next…”
“Yeah! After that, things got even worse!”
“We wouldn’t just run off for no reason. And why do you keep calling us nerds? We have names, y’know! We’re in your class!”
“These mushrooms are amazing!”
But they were right. They’d escaped from a terrible situation. I doubted there was any silver lining to their story.
“Isn’t nerd the name of your species? You’re nerds A, B, C, and D. Just like how we fought Goblins A and B and so on.”
How else was I supposed to refer to them?
“Those aren’t names! What do you think we are, a type of monster?”
“Stop calling us that! What if Nerd A really shows up in my stats?”
“Yeah, like monsters!”
“Huh?” Nerd D looked around at them in confusion. “I thought you guys really were named Nerds A, B, and C.”
“Traitor!” roared the other nerds. Even the nerds were infighting. Whatever happened next in their story couldn’t be good.
“All right, all right. enough joking around,” one of the nerds said. “Haruka-kun, how did you end up here?”
Uh, I wasn’t joking, but I decided to let the matter rest.
“Well, I was summoned here like the rest of you, but I didn’t run into anyone else,” I said. That was probably another benefit of the Loner title.
“I thought you’d gotten away from the magic circle. You were running like crazy!”
“You were incredible!” they shouted.
Huh? Had they been watching me in the classroom?
“We were all in the middle of the classroom when it got pitch-black except for the magic circle,” I continued. “The circle gradually became brighter until it suddenly flashed blinding white—and the next thing we knew we were in a white room. But you were all so calm! No one reacted.”
“Yeah! I was fine with it because I knew we were getting summoned to another world. But first you tried to break open the window, and then you climbed a locker before disappearing into the ceiling—I was pretty surprised!”
So they *were* paying attention to me?
“In most of the books I’ve read, getting summoned to a fantasy world comes as a surprise, doesn’t it? I mean, it was totally epic, but wow, you were so

on top of your escape back there. It was like watching a movie! I mean, I didn't see you myself, but the other guys told me about it later."
"It wasn't like a movie. There's never been a movie about a guy who escaped getting summoned by jumping out through the ceiling," one of the nerds shot back.
"Yeah, that was one of a kind!"
"Normally you'd just give up after the door and the windows didn't work!"
"You were practically a ninja!"
What was that supposed to mean? He was *literally* a Ninja.
We all took turns having a bath and then napped for a while. We shared some information and discussed our plans. After that, they continued their story. Boy, did things get ugly.
In the end, the nerds were the only ones doing all the chores like gathering food, keeping the base in order, and fighting the monsters. Class Rep and some of the other students did their best to help out, but everyone else just complained nonstop about the nerds' efforts. When they weren't whining that there wasn't enough food, they were insisting that the tents were too small. I'd been working way harder than them, and I was technically an unemployed hermit!
The nerds worked hard to level up, partly to fight monsters, but mainly because someone in class had two of the god-tier abilities: Mesmerize and Puppetry. The only ways to fight those abilities were to level up, earn resistance skills, or to find those students and seal their power.
Powerful skills like those required a lot of skill points. Mine didn't require skill points, so they were definitely not powerful. Of course.
Eventually the nerds learned Appraisal and leveled it up to try to find out who was using Mesmerize and Puppetry. Whoever took those skills must have been up to something. Maybe their Appraisal level wasn't high enough, or maybe inactive skills couldn't be detected. Either way, they didn't figure it out. Maybe the culprit concealed their skills somehow, but the nerds should have been high level enough to break any concealment.
"I was literally the last one to pick my skills, and those were definitely taken," I said. "So somebody's playing a twisted mind game." One person had turned the camp into their own sick playground and was bending others to their will without them knowing.
"We were some of the first ones to pick, and those skills were already gone," one of the nerds said.
"Just one of those skills is enough to play sadistic mind games. Someone using both of them is just unfair!"
Knowing these nerds, they definitely skipped past the old dude's explanations and went straight to ogling the skill list. Which meant that almost immediately after getting to the white room, someone took Mesmerize and Puppetry. Maybe they wanted to control other people, or maybe they just wanted to start a harem or something. Probably both. *It's*

not like that's a good reason! If anything, it made the mind games even creepier.
"And your bathtub is insane!" Nerd B suddenly exclaimed. "It's even got decorations!"
"But without beautiful female servants, even a beautiful bathtub feels like the desolate sea…" Nerd C sighed.
"Then go drown in it!" Nerd D shot back, and we all laughed.
The nerds took turns telling me the rest of the story while the others slept. *I want to sleep, too! This story is way too long!*

DAY 8

If we rescue them, do you think they'll let us touch them?

THE CAVE

THE NEXT MORNING, they continued their story over breakfast. Swallowing a story this dour in between mouthfuls of mushrooms threatened to give me indigestion. After I complained, swore, and criticized their storytelling, they got the hint and told me the short version. They seemed disappointed, like they enjoyed recounting their own misery in all its gory details.

We were summoned to another world and forced to fight for survival, but the story still sounded like high school gossip about my classmates' infighting and petty drama. It was like we never left.

Insults over breakfast. Those were more appetizing than mushrooms, I'd say. Anyway, they continued their story…

"And once we talked about needing to level up and accumulate SP to use powerful skills…"

"Some of the guys suddenly decided to start leveling up."

"Yeah, they started grinding the weak goblins nearby."

"They never went far from the base."

So, the wannabe delinquents, I'm guessing? They obviously ignored the old geezer, too.

"If that was the guys I'm guessing, they were obviously up to something, right?" I asked.

Thank god I had concealed my presence and hid from them earlier. If I didn't love sneaking around so much, I'd be dead meat.

The nerds had eavesdropped on the wannabe delinquents and found out that they wanted to brainwash the girls into becoming their servants, the vile perverts. I couldn't believe they announced their plans out loud in the middle of camp like a bunch of crappy movie villains. *A forced harem, huh? I'm surprised the nerds didn't predict this, given how much those guys bullied them.* Real badass delinquents wouldn't have gone for something as cowardly as mind control. Those guys really were a bunch of posers. *I guess the nerds weren't expecting them to try something that scummy.* So, what happened next?

The inevitable, of course: the nerds took countermeasures. They told the Class Rep everything, including their worries about the Puppetry and Mesmerize user, and their plan to seal him as soon as they figured out who he was. Soon after, the Class Rep started to level up, too. She was overpowered even before she ended up in a fantasy world.

They came up with a plan and made preparations, leveling up all the while. Five days had passed since the summoning. Once the wannabe delinquents got to level 15—after killing practically hundreds of level 1 and 2 goblins for the experience—they unlocked Puppetry. You had to give it to them for

being so focused on killing level 1 goblins. They kept going until they gained Mesmerize, too.
They came back to the camp intending to start their harem and inaugurate it with an orgy. They weren't wannabes anymore—they had leveled up into full-on delinquents.
By a pure stroke of luck, they ran into the Class Rep, who was also the most beautiful girl in our class. Hideous grins broke out on their faces, like poisonous flowers suddenly coming into bloom. They smirked at one another and leered at her as they drew closer…
In a flash, they convulsed and stopped moving. Holy hell! Your Imperial Class Rep-ness, what are you?! And why wouldn't they describe what exactly she did? Did they swear to protect her privacy or something?
After the delinquents collapsed, someone sealed the Puppetry and Mesmerize users. They didn't tell the Class Rep which of them had used Seal to keep the delinquents from trying to get it out of her.
So, they bound the delinquents with rope, dragged them back to the base, and exposed their Puppetry-Mesmerize-Slave-Harem-Orgy plan for all to hear. The female students were furious. Terrified, the delinquents threatened the nerds and screamed at them to lift the seal—or else.
Obviously, everyone responded with a chorus of jeers. The easily forgotten normies, who the delinquents had also planned to enslave, were also incensed. The class was baying for the blood of the delinquents, who were now completely overcome with terror. In a raucous brawl, the classmates expelled the delinquents from the camp and banished them to the woods. Even as they were driven out, the delinquents kept threatening the nerds in particular.
That should have been the end.
Later that night, the four nerds were relaxing and chatting in their tent. The Ninja was the first to notice that the tent was surrounded by a group of six, still some distance away. If they were monsters, they would have tripped the Sorcerer's detection sphere, so they knew that the mysterious group was human. Someone had infiltrated the camp, somehow getting past the moat, sentries, fences, and traps.
"Get out here, you goddamn nerds! Don't even think about bringing your weapons! Now!"
As they heard the voice, their tent burst into flames. The four piled outside. The Guardian attempted to tighten his defensive barrier, but a huge wave of magic blasted him. The Saint used his Light Magic to strengthen the barrier and bore the brunt of the attacks, while the Ninja used flash bombs to blind the enemy and the Sorcerer overwhelmed them with rapid-fire air strikes. They'd planned that strategy ahead of time and acted on it without a hitch, but the surprise attack still put them at a huge disadvantage.
And while the nerds could only respond with weak whips of Air and Water magic, the enemy bombarded their tent with rounds of Fire Magic and explosions. The enemy fully intended to kill them. The nerds were backed

into a corner with no one to help them. They knew they wouldn't last much longer, but they still weren't prepared to go all out trying to kill other human beings.
At that moment, the Class Rep and some others finally got back from one of their patrols in the woods and provided some cover fire for the nerds. When the nerds escaped from their tent, the delinquents didn't even try to stop them.
"Next time we see you, you're all dead!" one roared.
The nerds ran off. As the dust settled, the Class Rep could see that the camp was razed to the ground. Many other classmates were hurt in the crossfire. Worse, all the surplus food was incinerated.
Apparently the guys who were supposed to stand guard let the delinquents past after the delinquents threatened them. "We're just here to talk," the delinquents had said. "And if you get in our way, we'll have a little chat with you, too."
Since the delinquents were eager to exact their revenge, the nerds couldn't afford to leave camp entirely. There was safety in numbers. They had no choice but to rebuild the camp and defenses, forage for more food, and do what they could to protect themselves. They needed to stay vigilant day and night.
Despite their injuries, the nerds helped put out fires and treated their classmates' wounds. They collected all the tents that could still be used from the wrecked camp and set them back up. As they did all this, they were berated by the entire class.
"It's all your fault!"
"You shouldn't have pissed them off!"
"Take responsibility!"
The other students escalated from name-calling to spitting at them, and then to throwing rocks at them.
They had no allies. They were down to two choices: run away or kill the delinquents.
Four nerds by themselves couldn't possibly stay vigilant day and night. If they split up the responsibilities like they had been doing, anyone who did a job alone would have a target on his back.

The Class Rep tried her best to convince the rest of the class that they would regret exiling the nerds. She wanted them to protect the nerds and acquire food in groups. Without them, the class would have to fight off both delinquents and monsters, so everyone needed to start leveling up as well. They'd relied on the nerds for their survival—she begged the class to think about what would happen if they died.
But her arguments fell on deaf ears. No one wanted to fight the delinquents. Most of all, no one wanted to get killed or wounded. Besides, some students argued, if the nerds were so strong, they should be able to defend

themselves. It was just like in school, when people would mooch off the nerds for group assignments one minute and then lash out at them the next. When the nerds asked everyone for a compromise, no one was even willing to think it through. And the nerds couldn't bring themselves to beg for forgiveness from their classmates. So they decided to take their pride with them and survive on their own. Just like that, the four nerds were off running, pursued by delinquents, abandoned by their peers.

Their depressing story had reached its conclusion, so we took a break to eat a late lunch. *Any guesses what we ate? You got it—mushrooms!* Then we discussed what we'd learned since the white room. With a simple bribe of juice, they gladly taught me Hiding. When I told them my only weapon skill was Cane Mastery, they went into a classic nerd spiel about a famous martial arts technique called Shinto-Muso Cane Style. That cheered me up so immensely that I rewarded them with more juice.

We ended up chatting until the sun rose. *This may be the last time I talk this much,* I thought. It was possibly enough conversation to last me for a couple months. I was Loner Lv2 now, after all.

We had a late dinner. Afterwards, we hastily prepared for bed. They joked that I was fattening them up like a fairy tale witch. I wasn't sure anyone could get fat eating only mushrooms, but I did have more than enough mushrooms to find out.

The nerds took baths and finished their preparations for a journey the next day. They lay down to sleep.

"We were going to head over to the nearest town," one of the nerds said. "Want to come with us?"

Huh? An invitation? A chance at…companionship? Isn't this how people got recruited into cults and multi-level marketing schemes? I don't want to sell knives door-to-door.

"Sorry," I replied, looking away. "I'm unaffiliated." *The perfect answer.*

"Affiliation? We're not talking about affiliations!"

Goddamn it, don't be persistent about this.

"I'm not interested in subscribing to any magazines or anything," I responded. *How about that? My final answer!*

"Magazines? What are you even talking about? Kind of freaky that you're thinking of magazines in a fantasy world!"

Even that didn't dissuade them?! They're being so earnest that it would be rude to keep joking about their cult.

"Seriously, I have no interest in adventuring. With the skills I have, my best bet for survival is to live as a cave-dwelling hermit. Thanks for the offer, though."

My cursed skill list would probably just get in everyone's way. I couldn't make the nerds stay here either. They looked like they were itching to go into town. Had they forgotten that the delinquents were trying to kill them? Truthfully, I did consider going into town to become an adventurer. That's the classic way to play a game like this. But I would've needed to pay for

food and lodging there. To get that kind of money, I'd need to fight powerful monsters. Here in this cave, I could live rent-free with unlimited food from the forest and no real threats or dangers. I might have lacked some material comforts, but the forest was safe. I didn't want to go to a scary, dangerous town that was probably unwelcoming to strangers.

"You don't want to be *an adventurer*? This is a fantasy world, dummy!" *Who are you calling a dummy?*

"Just come along with us! Strength in numbers, bro!"

"If we say we're adventurers, we could get all sorts of powerful weapons!"

"And it's a town, so there'll surely be pure-hearted young maidens looking for heroic adventurers!"

I considered it, but I wasn't one of them. I didn't have an awesome title or overpowered skills. And what was so wrong with being a shut-in, a loner, and a NEET? Well, besides the obvious.

And what were they saying about "young" maidens? *You some pervy old man?* Just how young did he mean by that?! *Maybe I should call the police…*

"No," I said. "I have terrible skills, and my titles would probably prevent me from going with you in the first place. I only know some basic Earth Magic."

I kept quiet about knowing Fire Magic.

Their objections assailed me so quickly that I couldn't counter them.

"What are you talking about?" one of the nerds responded. "You easily wrecked some strong monsters when we met."

"And you can become even stronger by leveling up! Even with your weird skills!"

"Between your Earth Magic and knowledge of the modern world, you could develop technology for a local lord!"

"This stone furniture would sell really well in this world!"

"You have Cane Mastery, so if you got your hands on an extra-long one…"

"Yeah, maybe he could use a three-section staff!"

"You could make a wall with your Earth Magic and shoot at enemies from cover."

"And you never get sick! Health is essential in a world without modern medicine."

I couldn't help it; I was impressed by all their ideas and suggestions.

If not for these guys, all forty-two of my classmates would probably have been wiped out by monsters already. They were the ones who acquired enough food to feed everyone and taught my classmates how to use their skills. They were good guys.

The nerds kept talking, their voices overflowing with enthusiasm.

"Towns are usually built near rivers, so if we just head downstream, we should find one."

"What about deep in the forest? Elf villages are always in forests!"

"It could be a town of beastmen in the forest!"

"If we find some high ground, we could make a map…"

Just listening to them, I felt like I was learning too much.

“There must be slaves who need to be rescued somewhere in this world. Beautiful girls trapped in harems!”
“Princesses captured by pirates are waiting for us even as we speak!”
“But even if we rescue them, do you think they’ll let us *touch* them?”
“And think of the barmaids in town! They’re the real reason people flock to taverns in fantasy worlds!”
“I can hardly wait!” they all shouted.
Hm… Maybe they aren’t good guys.
“Maybe they’ll have dog ears! Think of the fluff…”
“I *know* that sexy elves are under attack somewhere! We need to save them! From demon lords with tentacles!”
“Think of how petite the dwarf girls will be!”
“And the cursed female knights who’ll die if they don’t find a mate!”
“That would be too good to be true!” they all screamed.
Yep, they’re garbage. Time to throw them out.

DAY 9

It's not my fault I relapsed into the mindset of an embarrassing junior high student!

THE CAVE

M*Y GOD, what a raucous morning! What's with all that chattering? I just wanted to sleep.*

"It's bright out now. I guess it's about time?"

To say thanks for all the intel, I handed the nerds a knapsack stuffed with ten days' worth of mushrooms. One of them staggered under the weight. *Oh well, not my problem. So long, mushrooms! Goodbye, fun guys!* They headed into the forest. *Weren't they planning to go to a town?*

"Don't get captured by any classmates!" I called. "Now shoo!"

"Shoo? Fiiine, we're going!"

They turned to me and shouted in unison: "Are you sure you don't want to come?!" *How did they always manage to talk in unison? A mystery for the ages…*

They just didn't take the hint! If they were cute girls, I might've been persuaded to follow them. Even a loner like me, with the right enticements, can be lured from this cave. I mean, I'm practically a klutzy anime girl, I'd fit right in.

"I refuse!" I said, posing like a Joestar rejecting the call to Bizarre Adventure.

"Aren't we supposed to be the nerds? You've been one of us all along!" they cried. What were they trying to say about me?

"Sure, I read manga and light novels, but I don't get all *moé* about it like a big otaku!" I retorted.

"We don't have *moé* feelings over manga!"

"Yeah, not usually!"

"Well, only sometimes…"

"I've only felt it once! Well, twice!"

All the nerds started talking over each other. They were loud until the very end. Shame was not in the vocabulary of an otaku.

"Thank you for everything! See you again soon!"

"We really appreciate it. We'll make it up to you, so come into town sometime!"

"Now that you mention it, if we don't go soon we'll all become lawless barbarians."

"Good point!"

Uh, it's not like you guys have even found a town yet! And you're not gonna become barbarians—just shut-ins!

"Just get out of here already! See ya."

“See you soon!” they all cried in unison and set out toward a hypothetical town.
I sighed. Quiet at last.
Gnawing on some rabbit jerky, I entered the forest in search of goblins. The nerds had suggested that I level up by killing them with physical attacks. A kobold or an orc was probably worth way more experience, but they were likely too strong to bother with. Goblins were fine for now. I could fret about kobolds and orcs if I ever encountered them. I couldn’t even formulate a strategy for something I’d never seen before.
The nerds weren’t able to Seal my horrible skills before they left, though they tried. So I needed more experience. Fighting monsters was my only option.
I found a goblin and went after it, screaming.
“Hiyaaaaah!”
Then another one—I took it down with a battle cry.
“Hiyayayaah!”
Am I just a murderer now? I thought. Maybe I was going to get a new title, like Bloodthirsty Mohawked Outlaw or something. I checked—nothing yet.
The nerds claimed that the goblins around the cave were strong, but they were all level 10 to 15. All they had was Hammer Mastery, Great Strike, and Body Slam. *All weaklings.*
I figured they must’ve run into the goblins when they were totally out of magic, and panicked. Still, it was pretty pathetic that level 16 guys with cheat skills couldn’t beat them.
They did get bullied all the time, and were completely out of shape, so maybe they were way weaker than their level suggested.
Wait a second, there’s something else here! It was blue, tall, and thin, with a dog’s face. I had read about creatures like this—it was a kobold. I used Appraisal.

Kobold A
RACE: Kobold
LV: 11
HP: 40
MP: 6
VIT: 26
POW: 24
SPE: 37
DEX: 25
RES: 6
INT: 8
LUK: 18
COMBAT: Claw Mastery Lv3, Bite Lv2, Body Slam Lv1
SKILLS: Jump Lv1, Intimidate Lv1, Presence Detection Lv1, Smell Detection Lv3, Pack Tactics Lv1

EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick

It was definitely stronger than the goblins. Could I win against an opponent that had triple my speed? Then I noticed it wasn't alone. There was a second kobold, also above level 10. I tried to put some distance between us, but our eyes met. *Don't notice me! Shit, it has Presence Detection!* It charged toward me—fast—but it paused before attacking. *Even worse, they must be using Pack Tactics.* The other kobold rushed around me, flanking me from behind.

The second kobold barked as it swung at me from behind, but I was able to counterattack just in time, thanks to my Presence Detection. *I never thought kobolds actually barked in battle like that—maybe I should have a stereotypical battle cry? Aaagh—*

"Holy crap! That hurts!"

I wasn't being reckless, the first kobold was just too fast—it managed to bite me. Its face was inches from mine, and I could feel its hot breath on me as it opened its jaws wide and lunged at my throat. I barely managed to shove it away with the blunt end of my stick, but not before it sank its teeth into my hand. If I hadn't thrown my left hand up in defense, it would have bitten my head clean off. It was going to chomp my head like a ripe apple!

"That hurts like hell!" I said.

My hand was caught in its mouth as it dragged me across the ground. *This is bad.* It was too close to stab with the end of my stick. Because I was pulled off my feet, my swings had no weight behind them, either. With my hand stuck in its mouth, I could easily target the kobold's head—but I wasn't doing any damage at all.

My hand radiated pain, and the beast kept swiping me with its claws, causing even more agony. *Damn it!* I concentrated and infused my stick with even more magical power, then used Weight and Packing Magic to make it even heavier and stronger. I swung the stick from my shoulder like I was hammering a nail. *Take that!* My stick crunched into the kobold's head, sending it exploding in every direction.

"Oh my god…"

Crushed kobold was revolting. That was my closest brush with death.

Calming down somewhat and setting aside my thirst for vengeance, I plucked out a magical stone from the remains of the kobold. I used Appraisal: "Spellstone F-Class." No better than what goblins dropped, even though the kobold was much stronger. That didn't make any sense.

In the typical light novel, you'd be able to sell spellstones like that in a town, but if you got an F-Class stone from a kobold, you'd be way better off sticking to goblins. *Adventuring guilds have it rough in this world, if guilds even exist in the first place*.

I checked my stats. That was close! I reached level 4, but I'm nearly out of HP!

HP: 7/50
MP: 9/47

That's bad. I won't survive another real fight. I hid my presence and carefully retraced my steps. *Sneak, sneak, sneak.* After some time sneaking, I sensed something nearby. Oh, it was only goblins.
"Hyaaaaah!" I took care of them.
"Home sweet home!"
I was so exhausted that I could barely drag myself into bed, but I managed to tumble into it before I passed out. My bed, like all my furniture, was made from stone, so I hurt myself landing on it.
I made it. Somewhere along the way, I really began to think of this place as home. It was huge even with five visitors, so after the nerds left, it was… kind of empty. But it was definitely home.
Now that I was alone, I had a lot to occupy my mind. First, the intel the nerds gave me. I learned about my classmates out there in the forest, all the lore about this fantasy world—although I guess that was all just stuff they extrapolated from anime, light novels, and videogames. They were serious nerds, after all.
Still, even after everything they told me, I couldn't understand why we had been brought to another world in the first place. The nerds were probably excited just to be here. They were living out their dreams. It was unsurprising that they were way livelier than they had been back in school. I never realized they could get so chatty. *But they still got totally abused and vilified by the rest of the class…*
I was familiar with quite a few *isekai* light novels, but those nerds were on another level. The rest of the class had treated them like convenient servants to order around, but they were totally dependent on their knowledge and understanding of what was happening. The nerds had complete command over the rules of this world.
And if my classmates had acknowledged that, everything would be much better for all of them. Instead, they stuck to the social order from our old world, treating the nerds like scapegoats at the bottom of the social hierarchy, even in a world without high schools.
I honestly wasn't surprised that the idiots in my class hadn't realized they needed the nerds more than the nerds needed them. They didn't have anyone left to rely on or who knew what to do. *You reap what you sow,* I thought. *It must be chaos over there.*
I still can't believe that they carried multitool pocketknives with them just in case they got sent to another world. All four of them! I could really use one of those… I should have offered more juice for a multitool.
And then there was the kobold—that was a complete disaster. It was just too fast. It managed to bite me and shred me with its claws. Why did it even bother holding a stick?

My bag wasn't torn, and my left glove was fine, too. When I used Appraisal on them, they still had that mysterious question mark next to their names. Seriously, what was up with that?

I hoped there weren't a lot of kobolds out there; they could overwhelm me way too easily. Was this the limit of using a stick as your weapon? So-called Cane Mastery? *I just have to train and get stronger.*

I was pretty familiar with swordsmanship via kendo practice. I'd at least seen movies and anime where people fought with spears and longswords. But cane fighting? Wasn't there a movie with a magician guy in glasses who fought with a staff or something?

I recalled from battle scenes in manga and anime that you could swing a staff like a sword and thrust it like a spear, so that's what I practiced with my stick. Over and over, I struck the poses, and—through repetition—forced my body to memorize the moves.

"Phew."

I was exhausted. Without realizing it, I had become totally engrossed in practice.

I had pretty much figured out Shinto-Muso Cane Style. With mantras like, "Stab like a spear, swing like a halberd, slash like a longsword," it was exactly the style that would appeal to a barely pubescent geek. *It's not my fault I relapsed into the mindset of an embarrassing junior high student!* I twirled the stick above my head and struck a victory pose. *Man, if anyone saw that I might just have to kill myself. Luckily, I'm a loner!*

The cave floor was slick with my sweat. With the floor like this, and my stamina and MP still recuperating, it was time to test out my cleaning experiment.

I originally got my Earth Magic from flattening and shaping the floor with Packing Magic. What if I tried packing the water to mop the floor all at once?

I took out a water jug I had crafted. *It's still easier to carry it than to rely on magic, but that's my little secret.* I poured the water onto the floor. *Roomba time!* I pushed the dirty water outside to throw it away.

When checked my status, my suspicions were confirmed—I now had Water Magic Lv1. *Perfect.* The floor was clean but still damp, so now I planned on drying it with some magically packed wind, hopefully earning Air Magic in the process.

The experiment was a success. Now when I checked my status, rather than seeing Fire, Water, etc. with each listed out separately, it read Four Elements Magic Lv1. Air Magic must have been folded into that.

I had been using Magic Infusion on my wooden stick, so for all I knew, I might have Wood Magic, too. Thunder, Ice, and Healing Magic were all possible skills, but I had no idea how to go about learning them. I doubted that I could simply pack up a literal bolt of lightning.

Just for the hell of it, I tried using Magic Infusion on the goblin clubs. A loud snap echoed through the cavern.

Oh, it broke. I tried it again on the next club, this time slowly. The sudden *crack* startled me. I had barely begun, yet it was already in pieces.
“Infuse! Goblin Club!”
The next one broke, too. I used Infusion on a “Wooden Stick?” all the time, so why couldn’t I infuse a goblin club? The only possibilities I could think of were that Infusion was too powerful or that the clubs were too weak. *Could be both.*
I retrieved the wooden stick looted from the kobold, but this one didn’t have a question mark in its description.
“How about this one?” *Snap!*
It shattered into splinters. Either my “Wooden Stick?” was somehow able to absorb the magic it was infused with, or its durability had somehow leveled up from using it. Either way, I had to be careful—it was my only weapon. If I broke it with my own spells in the middle of battle, I’d be totally done for. I gently sprinkled it with magic. *Yes, this is working!*
My magical power slowly infused the stick. It’s still good, just be careful, don’t break. Just a little bit more… There we go!
The stick felt strange in my hands. Did I somehow break it? Breaking out in an anxious sweat, I quickly used Appraisal.
The stick’s description had changed to “Sylvan Staff.” I felt it thrum with a gentle pulse. *Did I make it stronger?* It felt like a living plant! I waved it through the air a few times and it seemed fine. However, I was completely out of MP and felt like I was going to collapse before I reached the bed.
That’s enough experiments for today. Good night!

DAY 10
Could you even call this Cane Mastery anymore?
THE CAVE

I WOKE UP SORE and aching all over. Why did I think that a bed made with Earth Magic would be as soft as a real bed? I might as well have been sleeping on the floor. At this rate I'd end up breaking my back.

Last night when I checked my status one last time, I saw Wood Magic Lv1 listed. I figured it might work on living trees, too. Maybe I could use it to accelerate their growth. I definitely wanted to test if it could help me craft wooden furniture.

I gathered up the splintered fragments of the shattered goblin clubs and tried using Wood Magic, but I realized I didn't know what to incant. *I know it won't work, but this is the one time it would be cool to say some florid phrase like "Spirits of the Trees, heed my commands and lend me your strength."* I tried to bend them into new shapes by doing the same thing I did to activate Packing Magic.

"Bend," I commanded. "Bend. Whoa!"

I sounded like a fake psychic addressing a spoon, but the wood responded to my commands and dutifully bent into shape.

I had no idea what the intended purpose of this magic was, but it still worked. *This might be as useful as Earth Magic.*

I went right to work on making furniture. Soon enough, I had a kind of mid-century table near the middle of the room—a long, rectangular countertop with goblin clubs as the four legs; eight four-legged chairs in a modernist style around the table; a wide, round loveseat in the center; and even a big bowl-shaped chair up against the wall.

Not good enough! I completely forgot my original objective. Why did a loner like me need so many chairs, anyway? Don't you dare say I'm lonely!

I built the bed frame by stacking beams of wood as if they were the walls of a miniature log cabin. The bed itself was made from a softer wood, planed down into flat, slightly flexible boards that I laid atop the frame. *Perfect!* It was a slatted bed—nothing compared to a modern mattress, but way better than sleeping on a rock, and it wasn't like I had a mattress or springs lying around. I also made some hip shelving and placed it along the walls. Of course, I didn't have anything to put on the shelves. I tried putting the extra goblin clubs on there, but when I did that, they looked way less hip somehow.

With just one glance, I could tell it was way cooler than my former bedroom back in the real world. Even though all this furniture was made of wood and stone, it was better than the cheap crap I had in that tiny room.

I had completely lost track of time; it was way past noon. *Lunch break.*

It was late, but I still wanted to explore today. When I checked my Map skill, I realized that I had thoroughly explored the forest along the river, but all the areas farther from the river were blank. I had no idea what was to the east of my cave, which made me nervous. I decided to explore in that direction.

The area was thickly overgrown, although not quite as dense as the deep forest upstream.

“There sure are a lot of goblins,” I muttered.

I could sense their presences everywhere. Fortunately, they were unaware of my cave. A few goblins at a time were no problem, but if I ran into a horde, I had little hope of winning. I had no choice but to thin them out one at a time.

In order to better my chances, I continued to level up and hone my combat skills. I had to face danger in order to survive. Using Presence Concealment and Stealth, I approached a group of goblins. There were only three in this group, none of them particularly high level.

I readied my staff. I recalled the Cane Mastery techniques that I practiced last night as I closed in. Holding my breath, still concealed, I crept up on the nearest goblin and struck it with a two-handed grip. *Did I kill it?*

The flanking goblins closed in and swung their clubs. Switching to a right-handed grip, I thrust the end of the staff into the chest of the goblin to my right and followed up with a broad swing that smashed the goblin on my left. Before they could react, I took a few steps back and launched a fireball at the goblin that survived my sneak attack. Then, before the arcane flames had a chance to dissipate, I leapt through them, thrusting with my staff to land a killing blow.

I sucked in air through gritted teeth. *No time to rest, the one on the right still has some fight left.* Finishing the battle, I jabbed that monster with the blunt end of my staff. Before the dust had a chance to settle, I concealed my presence and surveyed my surroundings. *Hell yes!* My practice paid dividends! Practicing was mortifying, but it was worth it.

Maybe I was *too* effective, because the first goblin was still spurting a fountain of blood, headless. My staff was infused with magic, and I had slashed like it was a sword, but could it really have beheaded a goblin? Was this the true meaning of “slash like a longsword?” *Shinto-Muso is incredible,* I thought. *Obviously this is still a wooden staff, so it must be an additional effect of Magic Infusion.* Did my new acquisition of Four Elements magic improve Magic Infusion, too?

Sure enough, there was definitely a stab wound in the chest of the second goblin. When I thrust, I had imagined that I was holding a spear, so my staff must have pierced like one. Strange—did my staff extend itself when I swung widely? The goblin I smashed couldn’t have been in range, but I imagined a halberd swing when I attacked. Shinto-Muso Cane Style could work miracles. *It can make my staff sharp as a sword and as long as a*

halberd! Though it's not like I'm using the actual style, I just made something up based on what the nerds told me.

If there was a martial arts technique that could do stuff like that in the real world, it would be incredibly famous. *Magic is wild! At least I think this is magic.*

I also managed to easily shoot a fireball. Maybe I channeled the magic through my infused staff? But yes, it was definitely a fireball. It only flew about ten feet, so maybe it was a short-range fireball? *No, just call it a regular fireball!*

I thought about going back to my cave to do some tests and make sure I could still shoot a fireball. On the other hand, I already made it this far. I felt like I was asking for trouble if I spent any more time practicing alone in the cave.

My Shut-In, NEET, and Loner levels were going up. If I went back to the cave, could I even muster the willpower to leave it again? I had to move forward. Retreating and playing it safe wasn't an option.

I pulled myself together and hunted for more enemies. I found two of them. I cut the first one down with a *kesagake*—a diagonal slash—and then the second one. *It's just a stick. Sticks aren't swords.*

This thing could really kill two goblins in one fell swoop. *It's definitely a stick, though.* I stabbed another one. This thing was as good as a sword! I slashed and stabbed. *Is this really a stick?*

The sky was beginning to darken, so I started to head back to my cave. I looked around and realized that I might have, maybe a little bit…painted the woods red with goblin blood. What an awe-inspiring scene of ruthless slaughter. This was artisanal gobbo-cide! I puffed my chest up with pride.

My level 4 stats were probably helping me wage war on goblin-kind. I was quick, and I could cut, stab, and slice with impunity. So what if I went a little overboard at the all-you-can-kill goblin buffet?

When one of the goblins blocked my attack with their club, I imagined a hammer and used Weight Magic to smash their defenses. If I wanted to fight from a distance, I only had to imagine a gun to start blasting goblins with fireballs.

With my high stats, I was easily able to take down goblins, but I would still be toast if I ran into speedy kobolds or bulky orcs.

This world isn't just a game, I realized, the thought really sinking in. *It's like a game, but it's actually happening. I can't just restart from a save point if I mess up*. I gathered as many spellstones and clubs as I could and put them in my Bag of Holding. Today alone I had killed thirty-two, including my last fight when I took down twenty-five in a row. *Time to relax and recuperate back in the cave,* I thought. *Killing goblins is basically my job now. You can't really call me a NEET anymore*. Although I wasn't getting paid, so to speak, so perhaps it still fit. *Wait a second, I'm level 5 now!*

Lost in thought, I made it back home. It really did feel like home now. It was easily five hundred plus square feet, worlds better than my tiny one-room

apartment back in the real world. Now I had a kitchen, a bathroom, and even a toilet. *With a place like this, you can't call me a shut-in either!*
Over a late dinner, I thought back on my fights that day. I didn't have a gun, at least yet.
I thought about my grand fantasy introduction of the Shinto-Muso Cane Style. "Witness the glories of the Shinto-Muso Cane Style! Stab like a spear, swing like a halberd, slash like a longsword, shoot like a rifle, smash like a hammer! I will crush my enemies, see them driven before me! My magic is more powerful than ever before! Bwa ha ha!"
Yeah, I'll never say that.
I practiced casting fireballs. By picturing a gun in my mind, I made the orbs of flame much smaller but longer range—they traveled about thirty feet. Soon they were able to pierce stone. I didn't think of them as fireballs anymore; they were flame bullets.
I realized that this magic only worked as long as I had a clear mental image. That was the main factor determining whether the flame bullets stopped after hitting something, pierced through a target, or set it on fire. Could you even call this Cane Mastery anymore? I had a lot to think about. I felt like the Association for the Study and Advancement of Cane Mastery was going to file an official complaint for abusing their techniques or something. As a loner, I didn't have to worry about that; I couldn't have become a member even if that organization was real.

DAY 11

They're crazy. They were crazy even back in the real world.

THE CAVE

P*RESENTING TODAY'S BREAKFAST, fantasy world style:*
Stewed pemmican with seasonal mushrooms and herbs, lightly sautéed
(Seasonal availability) Salt-roasted hare
And I'm damn sick of it!

I hadn't managed a meal worthy of my level yet, but I was getting better at Cane Mastery—if you could call what I was doing "mastery." Anyhow, I definitely needed to gather more intel. The nerds, information machines that they were, had made their way to a town, but I didn't want to follow suit—I had no interest in encountering any more of my obnoxious classmates. If they found my beautiful mid-century home, they'd claim it for themselves without even asking permission. Based on what they had done to the nerds, I was confident nothing good would come from finding them. Still, I didn't know anything about fantasy worlds besides what the nerds told me. A town was a bad idea for another reason, too—I had no confidence that a visitor, totally ignorant of the local customs, could get by easily, let alone a bona-fide Loner Lv3!

Survival was my primary focus. I had to get strong enough to protect myself. My level was way below any of my classmates, and I also leveled up far slower thanks to Master of None and Blockhead. At least those abilities were still just level 1. I couldn't begin to imagine how terrible they would be if they reached level 2.

The students I'd seen so far were about level 11, and the nerds were level 16. Their best stats were around the 60-70 mark.

At the rate that I was growing, though, by level 10 my stats would all be around 120-150, and at level 16, probably at least 200. It's possible that later levels gave smaller stat increases, but up until now the rate of improvement hadn't declined at all. If anything, the increases per level seemed to be getting bigger.

Despite having reached level 16 in only a week, the nerds had trouble managing a group of five goblins. Sure, they were out of magic and with only one frontline fighter—their party wasn't well suited to close-range fights. Even so, they were all level 16, with overpowered skills, and they were experienced nerds who knew all about fantasy worlds and should've been even *better* than their level. Yet they were nearly taken out by two goblins sneak-attacking from behind.

If I knew other people from this world, I would be able to at least compare stats with Appraisal, but first I would have had to find someone willing to be

appraised like that. Focusing only on stats wasn't enough, anyway. *Weak opponents can still find ways to trap me.*

The nerds warned me about the most dangerous skills that typically featured in light novels: Servitude, Mesmerize, Hijack, and Instant Kill. If you weren't resistant, Poison and Sleep could also mean game over. The real danger in fantasy worlds wasn't the monsters; it was other people. *Good thing I'm an unemployed loner shut-in, right?*

Despite everything that happened, the nerds still went into town. That had to be incredibly dangerous, but they had a higher purpose for their quest. Yes, they were guided by an ineffable longing for something beyond living comfortably in a cave: girls.

They made the village sound like it would have dog-eared harem girls, beautiful and mysterious elves, pure-hearted young girls to marry, and cute dwarf girls, too. The ordinary high school girls from our class couldn't compare to their nerd fantasies. *Whatever floats your boat.*

I first encountered the wannabe delinquents when I was deep in the forest. I'd avoided that area ever since, especially after hearing the nerds' story. The nerds conveniently omitted the part explaining what had happened to the delinquents after the attack.

Even though their Mesmerize and Puppetry skills were sealed, they probably had other godlike skills. *Thanks, Gramps.* If they decided that violence was an option, then the rest of the class—no longer protected by a bunch of geeks—was in danger.

Why was I thinking about them? They were the rest of the class's problem, not mine. With a few exceptions, I didn't care what happened to my class. To be honest, though, I wouldn't have minded seeing the delinquents and mean girls run into a kobold. I couldn't imagine how they'd react to being bitten by one. *I learned the hard way just how much that hurts.*

I figured I ought to check on the state of my class firsthand. Sure, I didn't care about them, but I wanted to check in on the Class Rep. I had two motives: the nerds were pretty worried about her, and she was absolutely gorgeous. *I might be a loner, but I still have eyes!*

I scanned the forest in case I'd missed anything new to eat. There was nothing but an endless variety of mushrooms around here. Maybe there was other food deeper in the forest. *Yeah, I'll have to go check it out.* Gathering food, training, fighting goblins, and now reconnaissance? *The modern unemployed loner shut-in has many responsibilities to contend with. Too bad the world pays me in mushrooms.* I needed to fill in the blank spots on my map, too.

Given all that, I decided to head into the forest. From my cave, I first followed the river upstream. Maybe the delinquents had a base near the point where I saw them last time—they *were* talking about staying somewhere near there…but I was getting ahead of myself. *Upstream, huh?* Maybe I could catch some fish. I really wished I had Thunder Magic. *The best way to fish! Just one zap to catch and fry them at the same time.*

The forest upstream was more dangerous than I expected, but at least there weren't many mushrooms around. Actually, there was barely any food at all. Had someone eaten everything?

Unsurprisingly, there were tons of goblins, but none of them posed any threat. I could still be overwhelmed, so I had to be careful with groups of five or six, but they were all only levels 3 and 4, slow and weak. The goblins were so wimpy that I wasn't honing my combat skills at all. This monotonous grinding couldn't even be considered proper Cane Mastery practice. *Maybe calling it by its very official-sounding title will make it go better…right?*

Then I ran into some kobolds with their dopey dog faces, levels 2 and 3. I used Magic Infusion on my weapon and approached. *So the nerds were right.* Even though they were lower level than the goblins I'd fought today, they were definitely a little more challenging. They may have been fast, but they made a beeline straight for me—*did you learn to fight from goblins?* I just interrupted their charge and whacked them with my stick. *I guess this is technically cane practice. I have to pay attention to timing, at least.*

Battling the two kobolds, I realized that they hardly ever used their monster skills. The kobolds didn't even bother with Pack Tactics. They just kept trying to bite me.

It was easy to get used to fighting these guys. I was starting to understand why the nerds might have had trouble with the goblins—even the same monster can be a totally different fight depending on its level. This was nothing compared to the kobolds I faced before. Without thinking, I scowled at a kobold, and it recoiled in fear.

What a cruel face, scary eyes, and a wild stare. People had said that kind of stuff about me before. I mean, it's not like I didn't know what I looked like. *But don't be afraid of me! Am I a terrifying monster? No! I'm a human… aren't I?* The way the kobold cowered straight up hurt my feelings. Why was this thing hiding its tail between its legs?

I lost my cool and killed the kobolds. *You should consider the way your actions make others feel!* All I wanted to do was live peacefully in my cave, but the high-level monsters near there forced me to fight for my survival.

Orcs were the most powerful monsters in the area. They had more strength and endurance than goblins, and they had the Club Mastery combat skill. But even with their strength and skills, they were only on par with the goblins near my cave*. So that's why the level 16 nerds had such a tough time—they got complacent fighting the weak monsters in this area.*

I finally sensed some kind of campsite with my Clairvoyance, but the fence and tents were trashed. With the nerds gone, I supposed there was no one left to repair things. Or did everyone move to a new site? I didn't see anyone around. From how the nerds had described the situation, I doubted that everyone stuck together after the nerds were exiled. But even if they did split up, I would've expected some people to stay behind. Tense and not letting my guard down, I approached the camp. I confirmed with my own

eyes that the camp was abandoned. So where did everyone go? Did something else happen?
I kept an eye on the perimeter of the camp while looking for some clue or sign as to what happened. Suddenly—I staggered. I saw something, and the information shot into my head and nearly threw me off my feet. *Is this some crazy skill? I'll figure that out later!*
I looked around again: the camp, the forest, the riverbed—
I found clues in two places. Near the center of the remains of the camp, where the nerds had been ambushed, were some old traces of magic.
And then, by the riverbank, where the river disappeared into the forest—the traces of magic there were fresh.
Recent traces of magic could only mean one thing: there was a serious fight after the nerds left.
I don't know how, but I can see the remnants of magic use, I thought as I ran to the tree line. I followed the magic for nearly an hour before I found its source. I could sense one group chasing another in my direction. *Should I hide and figure out what's going on? Or should I go help them?*
I decided to sit back and watch. Someone in the fleeing group was bleeding; I still couldn't see who it was, but I could feel their presence.
If the runners were the bad guys, I'd stop them. Or if the chasers were the bad ones, I'd stop *them*.
But when I saw them, I realized that both sides were equally awful. All right, time to go home. What should I have for dinner? Mushroom surprise? Ooh, or I can treat myself to some mushroom-stuffed mushrooms? Goddamn it, if only I could get my hands on some delicious…
"Hey, you! Wait!"
Damn, did someone notice me?
I glanced over at the group.
"Ah, how nice to see you, mean girls! Well then, I really must be going!"
I ran off. When I thought I was far enough away, I stopped to pick some fruit, but the mean girls caught up to me, all babbling at once.
"Wait up! I'm telling you to *stop*!"
"You're not going anywhere!"
"Did you call us mean?!"
"How dare you!"
Now they were treating me like the villain. La la la la, I'm not noticing you! Gotta go, mean girls, no time to chat!
"Why do you keep running away?!" they screamed.
Of all the people I could've run into, it had to be the mean girls. If they were the cute and perky type I would've stopped, but not for these jerks. Couldn't that old dude have swapped them out for some cuter girls?
"Shouldn't you be surprised to run into us here?" one of them shouted. "What are you doing out here anyway? Why won't you look at us? Why won't you *say* anything?! We're your friends! Stop just standing there!"

I have to get out of here, fast! They had pretty much cornered me. What were they talking about?
“Why should I be surprised at all?” I said. “And what are *you* doing here? And since when are we friends? I’m a loner—never mind, don’t make me repeat myself!”
I had no idea who was chasing them, but there was no way in hell I was going to help the mean girls.
“Do something!” one of them cried.
Do what? Screw this, I’m out of here.
“Wait!” they all cried as I started to run away. *“Please!”*
Did they just say please? They must’ve been so loud that they broke my ears. I was hearing things.
“Please, *please* help us. Please,” one of them repeated.
The shock nearly knocked me off my feet. Was this their special attack? A skill? They actually said please!
“I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you’re one of Oda-kun’s friends, right? We’re looking for them. Like, if you know what happened to them, you have to, like, totally tell us! Please!”
The Queen Bee appeared to be speaking to me, but was it some kind of sorcery? The Queen Bee is mean by mean girl standards. As the queen of meanness, she was an unstoppable factory of selfishness, whining, and abuse. Her meddling was the reason our class had split into factions in the first place. There was no way “please” existed in her vocabulary.
I looked at her in confusion. “Who are you? I don’t recognize you!”
“W-what? We’re in the same class!” she shouted. “Knock that crap off, you know exactly who I am!”

Ah ha, I got her to snap. I could tell from the entitled anger in her voice that this was the Queen Bee's true form.
"You're real?"
"What do you mean real?! Stop it with the nonsense!"
Okay, that confirms it.
"Sorry about that. When I heard you use the word 'please' I thought maybe some demon of kindness had taken over your body, but you really are the Queen Bee," I said.
"Queen Bee? I'm not a demon." She came closer. "Please just tell me, what happened to them?"
"What the hell happened to you?" I cried.
"Nothing!" she screamed.
I couldn't believe it. "So…you really are the Queen Bee?"
"Well, yes! But no! I'm really me, but we're not mean girls!"
I shook my head in confusion. "I'm confused, which is it?"
"Fine, if you want to call me a Queen Bee, so be it!!" She took a minute to catch her breath.
That was all the proof I needed. No one else could shout loud enough for double exclamation points.
"Wait, who's Oda?" I asked.
"You know Oda!" she cried. "You always talked with him and his friends!!"
An Oda that I used to talk to…an Oda the mean girls were searching for…
"Oda? Oda. Ota…otaku…" I scratched my head. "Ohhh, you're talking about one of the nerds. I think you mean Nerd A."
"His name is Oda!" She shook her head vigorously, still breathing heavily.
He wasn't Nerd A? What a shocking revelation! *He'll always be Nerd A to me.*
"So why are you looking for the nerds?" I asked. "Are you gonna make them do more stuff for you, or are you just hunting them for sport?"
I finally turned around and looked them in the eyes.
Please don't look too horrified, I thought. My ego was fragile after that fight with the kobold.
They just glared at me. So what if I glared in return, after what the nerds had told me? If they tell me they're after the nerds, then…
"We want to apologize," the Queen Bee said.
Huh?!
I shook my head. *I must have really lost my mind.* "You mean capture them and force them into indentured servitude? Or did you mean to say, 'hand them over to the delinquents?' Or—"
"No, we want to say we're sorry!"
"Wait? For real?"
"Yes! We like really, *really* want to properly apologize," she said. "We don't expect them to help us anymore and they don't have to forgive us if they don't want to. The best we can do is, like, say we're sorry. That's all we can do."

“We’re totally dead anyway,” another mean girl said. “They’re the only reason we’re still alive. We can’t survive in this world without them. We just want to super apologize to them one time. Please! If you know where they are, tell us!”
“Please!” they all cried, bowing their heads.
This…this is much less believable than getting summoned to a world of swords and sorcery, I thought. They claimed that they had changed their ways, that they had given up their old way of life. All they could think about anymore was how grateful they were toward the nerds and how ashamed they were about what had happened. They just wanted to settle matters before they died. It was like leaving an apology in your last will and testament.
Finally, I said, “I know what direction they went, but I’m not sure where they are now. You won’t be able to catch up with them. You’ll need to make your way through the forest. Can you even fight?”
I had no idea how the nerds would react to an apology. If they had half a brain, they’d just tell the mean girls to take a hike. But the nerds were so good-natured that they might end up becoming the personal guards of the mean girls, thereby assuring their mutual destruction.
Maybe I was worrying a bit prematurely.
“There’s really no way you’d be able to catch them,” I stressed. “Are you sure?”
The mean girls looked at the ground and trembled. Facing death, they seemed prepared to do whatever it took. *Talk about developing a conscience way too late.*
“We don’t care, just tell us,” the Queen Bee said. “We have to try even if we never reach them. Please…please!”
Did they join the same cult the nerds tried to lure me into? Facing certain death, all they wanted to do was thank the people who had saved them the first time. They wanted to be able to forgive themselves for all their bullying and cruel treatment, and they figured going on a pilgrimage to atone for their sins was enough.
The gods that they relied on for everything were taken away. They’d lost everything they knew and were totally cast aside in the span of one week. The ordeals they’d faced had totally transformed them.
“The nerds told me all about what you did,” I said, doing nothing to hide the displeasure in my voice. “Before you can even consider apologizing to the nerds, you should apologize to the Class Rep and the others.”
The Queen Bee nodded. “We did!! The Class Rep said that she accepted our apology, but she told us to go apologize to Oda and the others in person. Before we could, the boys ambushed us and the camp split up. We don’t know where anyone is. We just want to find Oda and his friends.”
They really are at their wits’ end, I thought, finally understanding the whole situation. They were taken out of their school, the base of their power. The nerds, who were suddenly the strongest ones around in this new world,

were gone. They couldn't fight monsters or work together to survive. When the delinquents—full of unvarnished lust—went wild and attacked the girls, the Class Rep was able to drive them off but not before these girls got separated from the rest.
The mean girls were on the run, separated from the Class Rep, totally lost, and on the verge of death. This desperate situation forced them to confront their own actions and choices, so they wanted to apologize and make amends. *Are they really afraid that they're about to die?*
"Okay, there are only three possibilities. First, you get caught by the guys before you can find the nerds. Second, you're eaten by ravenous monsters before you reach them. Third, you fight off those sleazy guys, mash the monsters into pulp, and finally find the nerds and apologize. So what do *you* think is most likely?"
"Well…"
"Like, we can't do that…"
"That sounds too tough…"
"Just tell us where they are! Please!!"
I felt like they were on the verge of having a breakthrough, so I glared at them. They fell over on their backs, sobbing and trembling. *This is pathetic, I don't even have an Intimidate skill.*
"Personally, I don't care if you've had an epiphany or changed your ways or whatever," I told them. "Whether you're good, bad, or reformed means *nothing* to me. Ask yourselves, do you want to go apologize to the nerds, or are you happy just making excuses for the rest of your life?"
"But, like…"
"No buts! Answers only!"
A moment passed, and then giant exclamation marks appeared over each of their heads. Some weird effect of Master of None?
I guess that's settled.
"Listen up," I said, "I know all about how you treated the nerds. They were helping you, weren't they? They taught you how to survive, didn't they? Even when you ignored them! Even when you insulted them! Until they were literally forced to run away! They helped you even though you straight up abused them!"
The Queen Bee had four more exclamation points over her head, now. I counted thirteen exclamation points in total. There was no doubt about their resolve, now.
"Do you want to just give up and die after all they've done for you?! That would defeat the point of everything they did! Are you okay with that? They risked their lives for you, and with all your excuses about how tough things are, you want to throw it all away!!" I'd reached double exclamation point volume, too. "You're just going to die without putting up a fight? Why don't you try to survive?! Never give up!! Don't just go through life waiting to die!! Do you think they'll feel good finding out you died trying to apologize

to them?! That's no apology!! That's just making yourself feel better about giving up!!!!"
The Queen Bee's exclamation point ability must have somehow evolved, since she went pale white. *Huh, is something happening? Is this a new skill?*
Tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. "I don't want to die! I don't!! I want to *live*!! You're right, they did so much to help us!! We just want to, like, say a proper thank you!! You're right about everything!! We didn't listen, we didn't do anything, we didn't learn anything, we acted like none of this mattered!! We made tons of excuses and acted like we couldn't learn!! Even when they were about to get killed, we just made fun of them because, yes, we were, like, so stupid!! We couldn't do anything, and we were too scared to admit it! We couldn't help them!! We never said sorry or thanks—not even once!! Of course we don't want to die!! Dying here would be like totally the worst thing ever!!"
My god, that's a lot of exclamation points! That had to be like twenty-five in a row! My exclamation point skills pale in comparison!
I guessed Master of None allowed me to learn the Exclamation Point skill, but I still wasn't as good at it as them. *Blockhead must be holding me back —wait a second…*
For some reason, the Queen Bee was sobbing. *What happened? Did I say something wrong?*
"W-waaaaah!" she wailed. Not wearing any makeup, hair in total disarray, she seemed like a crying child. *Between the tears and the runny nose, her face sure is losing a lot of liquid.* I was starting to worry about dehydration.
If I went step by step, I should be able to figure out what was going on. The Queen Bee had unlocked new levels of Exclamation Point and forever surpassed me. But now, she was sobbing. *Is she having a nervous breakdown?* Now that our Battle of the Exclamation Point had ended, I felt tired and drained, like the spirit of a hot-blooded man in waders telling me to "Never give up!" had left my body.
Without the spirit of that man whose enthusiasm had made him a meme, I had no idea what was happening, so I figured I'd have to ask. I tried a gentle approach.
"Uh, so, er…" I looked at her. "What's wrong?"
The girls looked at me with tears streaming down their faces and a ghastly look of dread in their eyes. Okay, this is straight out of a horror movie! If any of them start chanting creepy children's songs, I'm out of here!
They all wailed, talking over each other: "We're so dumb! We didn't learn anything! We can't die like this! No way! Please, help us! Teach us how to survive and apologize to Oda! Please! Give us the power to atone for our sins, the power of reconciliation! Please!!!!"
"Uh, sure?"
Wait, did I just say yes?
Something inexplicable happened, something so weird that I wasn't sure if I could describe it. I felt something changing in my head…but I wasn't being

targeted by Puppetry or Mesmerize; that would have been impossible. This feeling was like a glimpse behind the curtain of reality. What lurked there, in the back of my mind, was something far worse.
It was my Servitude skill. Why now?!
The word Servitude floated before my eyes, and below it, I saw the names of the Queen Bee and mean girls A, B, C, and D. What was happening? I assumed that Servitude was a skill used to enlist monsters into my party. I totally forgot to test it out! Up until now, I'd just slaughtered every monster I came across.
And now the five mean girls were a part of my team? Did I just become the lead mean girl? Could I have evolved into the final form of the Queen Bee?
No way in hell!
In fantasy worlds, there were scummy people who used skills like Puppetry and Mesmerize to make girls do whatever they wanted.
And then there was me, who accidentally made a group of girls my obedient servants! Me! I'm sorry officer, I didn't know that I was committing a crime! I thought we were just talking! It shouldn't be possible for me to make five girls my servants! I'm a loner shut-in! Please, I didn't want to end up on the nightly news!
Desperate for a way out of this, I headed back into the forest, groaning. Queen Bee and mean girls A, B, C, and D followed, totally silent in lockstep behind me.
I started to get scared as I walked through the forest. When I looked back, I couldn't help but think that the girls were like a bunch of ducklings following a mama duck.
When goblins appeared, I took them out with fireballs and flame bullets before continuing on.
They're all looking at me with freaky, blank eyes. Are they trying to learn how to fight the goblins? I was a level 5 NEET, so we couldn't be expected to fight the same way. I kept my eyes forward as we traipsed through the forest because every time I glanced back at them I felt a cold sweat break out along my spine.
Where was I even going? I had no clue. I just kept walking. I couldn't stop or look behind me at any cost. *The look in their eyes is terrifying!* They wore the expressions of religious zealots. Their stares were so direct they could probably have bored a hole right through me.
I picked a direction and walked like I had a goal in mind. Periodically, I ran into kobolds. Without sparing a thought, I destroyed them and kept going. The monsters grew stronger as I continued, but I couldn't turn back. Five mean-girl ducklings were lurking right behind me!
I broke into a sprint. I was pretty much running away. A whole group of kobolds were in my way. I had a choice: kobolds dead ahead, or mean girls close behind. *Easy choice: kobolds. Come straight this way, good sirs!*
The five mean girls silently watched me and followed without any concern for themselves. *What do I do now?*

The kobolds ahead were serious business. They radiated an aura of strength. I couldn't turn back even if I wanted to.
As if they had learned from watching me, one of the mean girls went to a fallen kobold's body and retrieved the spellstone from its guts. She inexpertly gouged and tore at the kobold's body until the stone came loose, dripping with gore. The girl wordlessly offered it to me. Her arms were soaked in blood up to the elbows. I was scared out of my mind. *I want to cry!*
Servitude must have shared any experience I gained with the mean girls, since they began leveling up quickly. We fell into a routine: I lured a few kobolds from the main horde, and the mean girls silently readied their swords and spears, and executed them without mercy. Kobolds had never looked so pitiful. This was the first time I saw real fear in their eyes. My face likely wore the same expression. This was terrifying!
Somewhere along the way, the lecherous guys must've lost track of the girls. Maybe they were chased off by kobolds, or even killed? I didn't know or care what became of them because this was all their fault. They were the reason that the kobolds and I were traumatized. They were ultimately to blame for the horrors of murderous mean girls!
Better let them kill you quickly, poor kobolds, I thought. Even though we were enemies, we shared the same fear. Maybe the kobolds could be my allies against the real menace?
No one would be suicidal enough to attack the girls now. They had to be the most fearsome of all my classmates. The most terrifying creatures that the old man could've summoned were Japanese teenagers.
Kobolds were showing up in greater numbers at a variety of levels. They weren't a problem alone, but large packs of kobolds were dangerous. Whenever one had the bad luck to be in range, I volleyed flame bullets in its direction.
Thirty bullets for ten kobolds, loaded and fired. Sixty bullets for twenty kobolds, loaded and fired. There was but one solution to the ceaseless onslaught of kobolds: total suppression.
The kobolds were quick but not sturdy. Those that survived my fiery hail of bullets then fell to the merciless slaughter of the girls.
I lost count of how many we killed. It could have been thirty or even forty. I rained down a shining storm of bullets, the mean girls tore at them until their blood flowed like a river. The final kobold lunged for my throat, baring its teeth as my flame bullet blazed through its charred body. The heat of its breath reached my throat just as it collapsed.
Knee-deep in dead kobolds, the mean girl squad continued to kill stragglers, eviscerate their corpses, and harvest spellstones. Then they looked at me with their creepy blank stares.
They were covered in minor scratches and drenched in kobold blood.
"Here's an HP potion; you need to drink it to heal. Special mushroom flavor," I said.

But no one moved. Maybe they were sick of mushrooms, too? High school girls weren't exactly known to order mushroom-flavored beverages from vending machines. Neither were boys, for that matter. *Nor me!* I could even tolerate vegetable juice, but this made we want to hurl. To think that stamina mushrooms and medicinal herbs could combine to create such a vile concoction…

The Queen Bee finally spoke up. "Haruka…kun?"

"I take it that you hate mushrooms, too. I totally get it, they taste awful, and your whole body will smell like mushrooms afterward."

The mean girls just kept reaping their visceral harvest of spellstones from kobold corpses. A few days ago, they wouldn't listen to anyone, hated fighting, and would never have even dared to approach monsters. Even just the sight of blood would've started them screaming. Now they worked in total silence, methodically gutting the monsters and collecting the spellstones, not noticing that they were drenched in blood.

I was shocked. I didn't want to believe what I saw with my own eyes. The only rational explanation was that they'd become entirely different people. Their eyes were totally blank, almost corpse-like. *Yup, I'm terrified.*

The mean girls, in their abnormal state, handed me all the spellstones they gathered and returned to their grisly work. *What the hell are they doing?* Just a few days ago, they were freaking out about Mesmerize and Puppetry. They must've been terrified thinking about what those skills could be used for. If they saw themselves now, they would've been just as horrified. *Even I'm overcome with dread! I know I keep repeating myself, but I'm so, so scared!*

Before entering this world, they were the most selfish girls the world had ever seen, but now their minds were seemingly unrecognizable. This whole situation was too strange. They weren't just different; it was like their personalities were completely flipped. You couldn't call it an improvement, either. It was more like the effects of brainwashing or mind control.

If a guy with some sort of mind control magic offered a suspicious drink to a girl, would anyone in their right mind drink it? *Especially if it was made with mushrooms!* It had all the hallmarks of a trap, so of course they wouldn't. Both the drink and the guy were self-evidently terrible. Not to mention the mushrooms—what kind of creep would offer girls *mushroom* juice? I imagined what they were thinking: *that guy is the worst, he keeps glaring at me! Drop the scary expression already!*

Yeah, I was an unsavory character offering them foul-smelling mushroom juice. Maybe I could've masked the flavor with some fruit juice? The potion even looked vile. This whole scenario was so off-putting. I tried to recall what a light novel protagonist would do in a situation like this, surrounded by high school girls. *No, none of that would be appropriate.*

"Pssst, Earth to Haruka-kun, are you there?"

Cripes! I leapt with a start and spun around.

There was the Class Rep, inches from my face! Behind her was a whole entourage of female students. I nearly had a heart attack, my blood was rushing so fast. I looked her over, eyes drifting downward. *No, blood, don't rush there!*
"Can I at least have some of that potion?" the Class Rep asked.
"Huh? You want it?"
"Didn't you just say it was an HP potion? Why so surprised?"
"Uh, I mean, well, normally you don't just drink some sketchy potion that a stranger offers you…right?"
"We're classmates! What do you mean, 'stranger'?"
I stared blankly at her. "Uh…huh?"
The Class Rep was right in front of me, her beautiful face only a few inches away. She was the apex of all female Class Representatives. *I forgot how to breathe…is this how I die?*
"Uh, is that you, Class Rep-sama?"
"That is *not* my name! What's with the -sama?"
I needed to explain what was going on with the mean girls behind me before the Class Rep got the wrong idea, but I had no idea what to say. Even the truth was weird and kind of creepy. I couldn't just say "I enslaved them!" That was less of a justification and more of an admission of guilt.
"Haruka-kun, what's wrong with Shimazaki-san and her friends? Why are you with them in the first place?"
"Uh, well," I sputtered, "I can totally explain! It's kind of a long story and it sounds bad if I don't explain everything fully but I, *ahem*, enslaved them?"
"You did *what*?" she screamed. "That story was way too short!"
The scream of the Class Rep—that's not what I wanted this story to be about! Although that does sound like a pretty decent novel. Maybe I could order it online?
The only explanation was that I misclicked. Yes, we were all minors, but it wasn't my fault, right?
"Why on earth did you enslave them?! Isn't the Servitude skill meant for monsters? How could you possibly use it on your own female classmates?"
I wanted to know myself. Though, ideally, I would have liked to know how to rewind time to undo this whole mess. Maybe there was a spell "Back to the forest!" or something I could use? The Class Rep was clearly on the verge of erupting. I needed to take responsibility and find the right words to explain myself, but first I needed to get a few answers.
"Who's Shimazaki-san?" I asked. "Are you talking about that Romantic era novelist who wrote about samurai?"
"You enslaved her, and you don't even know her name?!" she screamed. "And her name is totally normal; why is the first thing you think of a historical novel?!"
The Scream of the Class Rep 2: The Revenge! Prepare for the third installment! I would totally buy that book, but maybe I'll wait for the deluxe

edition trilogy boxset. Also, I better start preparing for my trial. Does anyone know a good attorney?
“You came to rescue them, right? So why did you use Servitude on them? And why don’t you know their names? They’re your classmates!!” *And there it is—the third volume. I knew I would get a trilogy out of The Scream of the Class Rep.*
“Uh, I don’t know! They just show up in my status as Mean Girl A, Mean Girl B, Mean Girl C, and Mean Girl D!”
“How dare you call your own classmates by those names! How could you treat women like monsters?!”
The series continues! Limited edition!
Sheesh! The mean girls were standing behind the Class Rep. They had expressions so cold and unfeeling that you’d think they were made out of Ice Magic. Maybe I should use Heat Magic to thaw their faces? *Warm up their, uh, eyeballs?*
“Anyway, thank you for saving them,” the Class Rep said. “I was really worried.” She bowed her head to the Queen Bee.
“We just followed him,” the Queen Bee droned.
“Still, thanks. I really appreciate it.”
“Yes,” the Queen Bee agreed.
“Oh!” I said. “Shimazaki is the Queen Bee! I didn’t realize it because you gave her such a literary name. Of course I was confused.”
“Shimazaki is her last name!” Class Rep exclaimed. “I didn’t give it to her! Why do you keep saying Queen Bee?!”
Why was she getting mad at me? I wasn’t the one who put Queen Bee on my status.
“When you use Servitude, you get to name the monsters you enthrall,” Class Rep said. “The wrong name is showing up in the status view because you couldn’t remember her name and picked a cruel one to use instead!”
Class Rep was mad at me. But why? The Queen Bee was the leader of the mean girls! It made perfect sense. Why was I the bad guy here?
There were fifteen girls in front of me and five mean girls behind me. I was surrounded, and I couldn’t avoid their judgmental eyes.
Now I understand people who are afraid of making eye contact. I just wanted to curl up and disappear. They all glared like they expected me to say something. Do I have to? Maybe some eloquent words of surrender will satisfy.
“Uh great, thanks for everything. It’s been a real pleasure. See you all around!”
Flawless execution, now I have to get out of here. I’m totally exhausted. I just want to go home.
“You’re not going anywhere!”
A chorus of shouts came after me. No, please just let me go back. I’m not even supposed to be here! I’m a literal loner!

“At least let me thank you for the potion,” the Class Rep said. “I’m glad that they’re all safe. I want to thank you properly for rescuing them.”
Now she was thanking me. Wait a second, does that mean she actually drank that potion? Class Rep—she’s so brave!
“But how did you find us?” the Class Rep asked. “You couldn’t have had any idea where we were.”
“I was, uh, just passing by?”
“Just passing by? Why?!”
“Well, passing by might not be quite right. It’s more like I was running away and ended up here by chance?”
“What were you running from?!”
“Well, from the mean girls?”
“You’re the one who made us your servants!” said the Queen Bee, apparently snapping out of her fugue. “Why would you run away from your own servants?”
“Uh, because you’re terrifying?”
They all glared at me. The Scream of the Class Rep series must have ended. Instead, she was just staring at me. Scornfully. That’s the signature glare of Her Highness the Class Rep, a super-legit evil eye if I’ve ever seen one! Getting glared at by a gorgeous, scornful girl just inches away from my face is the pinnacle…of delight. I never thought anything this amazing would happen to me here!
She shook her head. “Talking with you isn’t getting us anywhere, so I’m going to have Shimazaki-san tell me everything. You stay right here. Don’t even think about going anywhere.”
So began the grand meeting of the girls. I stood as still as a tree. For some reason a few of the normal girls were giving the mean girls hugs. I just waited and watched. Occasionally, the Class Rep said something, and they all laughed. I watched them. Were they bullying me?! I guess with the nerds gone they had to find a new target. *That’s what happens to loners, they get excluded. And just sitting here with nothing to do. I’m so bored!*
I began writing randomly in the dirt. The ground was hard, so I wasn’t able to leave a mark. Curious what would happen, I used Magic Infusion on my finger and doodled circles and spirals in the earth. *It’s working!*
I willed more magic into my fingertip and busied myself with drawing spirals in the ground. I decided to power my finger up even further with some Earth Magic and drew a larger circular shape around me. As I carved that shape, the magic I was using seemed to grow into the form of a spinning helix. The earth sank under me as I drew. I could dig tunnels like this! I could expand my house underground! I focused my magic and imagined a sharp screw. By repeatedly drawing a simple spiral shape, I could bore deeper into the ground. *Soon my home will have a furnished basement.*
“Haruka-kun, why are you in a pit? I told you to watch and wait, how did you end up like this?”

I looked up at the Class Rep. She was staring down at me from above. *She blessed me again with her eyes full of scorn.*
“Uh, I was bored?”
Without even realizing what I’d done, I found myself sitting in a hole about fifteen feet deep.
“Don’t just dig a pit because you have nothing to do. When I saw your magic go off, I thought something crazy was happening!”
“Look, I was just bored and got caught up in drawing. I wasn’t trying to dig!”
“How…? Anyway, sorry for keeping you waiting.”
Making a pit was easy. Climbing out was the real pain.
“Okay, I heard about what happened from Shimazaki-san and the others,” the Class Rep continued. “You saved Shimazaki-san, Oda-kun, and the rest of us, too—thank you so much, really. Even though we should’ve been trying to save you, since you were totally alone.” The Class Rep shook her head. “I’m sorry for that.”
My face shone bright red. “Uh…remind me who Oda is?”
“What? You know Oda-kun!” Class Rep shouted. “He was with the guys from class who you helped out! You definitely met when they were running away! Why don’t you know anyone’s name?!”
The Scream of The Class Rep has a new volume! Coming soon to bookstores near you! When could I preorder a copy? Would I get any extras with my order?
“I think you mean Nerd A,” I said. “Yeah, I met him. The mean girls kept talking about this Oda guy too, but don’t worry, all the nerds are fine. They’re doing great.”
“His name is *Oda*! What is wrong with you? And how can you already have forgotten Shimazaki-san’s name? You’re such a jerk—” Class Rep ran out of breath and had to gasp for air. She must have been so exhausted and stressed from this past week.
“Don’t overdo it, Class Rep. I know you’ve been working hard to keep everyone safe together ever since we were thrown into this world. You must be exhausted.”
“Talking to *you* is exhausting!” she cried. “It’s the most exhausting thing I’ve done since being summoned here!”
So, it was my fault now? *Outrageous!*
“You said you were going somewhere,” said Vice Class Rep A, glaring at me. “What were you going to do about Shimazaki-san?”
I didn’t know their names, so I mentally referred to the Class Rep’s friends as Vice Class Rep A, B, C, and so on. I wasn’t sure which one was the real Vice Class Rep.
“What was I going to do? Uh, I guess I was probably going to put them back where I found them.”

“Put them back—what does that even mean?” Vice Rep A snapped. “You can’t just dump them on a street corner! You’re the one who enthralled them!”
“Well, if they’re really enthralled, they’ll listen if I tell them to go back to the forest, right?”
“What do you think Shimazaki-san and her friends are? Where’d you get the idea that their natural habitat is in the forest?!”
For some inexplicable reason, Vice Rep A had started screaming at me. *A new spin-off series for The Scream of the Class Rep?*
Vice Rep A didn’t have the natural endowments of the Class Rep, but she was still an elegant, tall, cool beauty. If this were a light novel, her type was always—despite her beauty and popularity—plagued by an inferiority complex toward girls with bigger chests. *Oh, and that makes her the perfect contrast to lead a spin-off novel.*
“You’re telling me that you had no ideas for what to do with them, and you just wanted to put them ‘back’?”
“Yep, no clue.”
The Queen Bee, silent until this moment, interjected, “Then get a goddamn clue! You need to bring us with you!” Now the Queen Bee was screaming at me. “Help us get stronger! What’s wrong with you? One of the only times you’ve said anything with certainty, and *that’s* what you decided on? You—”
She sounded like she was back to her mean old self. She was probably emboldened by the other girls to join in shouting at me. My ears were ringing preemptively.
“Ahem…whatever, are we on, like, the same page now?” the Queen Bee asked.
“I *have* helped you get stronger! Check your status! You can fight perfectly fine. In fact, you’re even stronger than the nerds were when they left, right?”
Thanks to Servitude’s experience sharing, they were all the way up to level 19. They had three more levels than the highest-level nerd. Besides, no enemy could stand up to them when they were in that spine-chilling, kobold-massacring demon god state. *I don’t ever want to witness that again; priority number one remains running away!*
“You’re high level and have plenty of SP. By using your cheat skills, you should be able to handle any monsters or lechers that cross your paths,” I said. “You can probably even hunt down the nerds with ease!”
“Why are you like this?!” she yelled. “We keep telling you that we want to go and apologize! We’re not trying to hunt them—”
“What if you just do what feels normal to you? Isn’t hunting nerds for sport one of your natural instincts?” I asked.
No one spoke. They all just stared at me. *Jeez, they’re all starting to make me feel bad.* The Class Rep looked both exhausted and disappointed, seemingly out of sympathy for the Queen Bee.

“Okay, let’s all relax. Haruka-kun is just like that,” Vice Rep B said. “We know that he might be weird, but he’s not a creep. His intentions are good. Right, Haruka-kun?”
Thank you, Vice Rep B! She was at the very top of our class in terms of grades and kindness. *But don’t be misled by the B in her name! No part of her is second rate.* For yes, somehow, her glorious bust was in a class of its own, surpassing even the natural endowments of the Class Rep. She was worshipped as a goddess among all the true believers in the cult of the chest. She nodded as she talked, and her breasts nodded along with her. *What fearsome power!*
“His intentions don’t matter, he enthralled Shimazaki-chan!” protested Vice Rep A. “She’s been in magazines!” She was just finding excuses to criticize me. Look, I didn’t do anything to take advantage of this situation, so why would that change in the future? She’ll find fault with anything! Huh, maybe talking down to people is just what excites her, I’ve seen that type in light novels…
“From what it sounds like, he keeps treating his own classmates like they’re wandering monsters,” said Vice Rep C. I couldn’t believe that even she had a bone to pick with me! At her height, not even I would treat her like a monster…though maybe like a pet rabbit or something. The word “small” was a perfect descriptor, even with regards to her, well… *Ahh! Why is she glaring at me? Could she tell what I was thinking about? Do tiny animal sidekicks get mindreading powers?!*
Even Class Rep was visibly exasperated. “Now that you mention it, we’ve been in the same class for eleven years, but he’s only ever referred to me as the Class Rep!”
I was bored witless this entire time. The girls’ meeting still seemed like it was far from over. *They’re such a chatty bunch!* With twenty girls in attendance, I imagined it would take a week just to decide what to eat for lunch. *They’d starve to death before coming to a consensus!*
“It’s getting dark soon, so I’ll leave the rest to you youngsters.”
“You’re the same age as us!”
“Uh…am I?”
I still wasn’t allowed to leave, so I started taking potshots at some kobolds and goblins to pass the time. Since it leveled up, my presence detection range had extended to nearly one hundred feet, but I didn’t know any attacks with a range that long. Since the girls would just get mad at me if I ran into the woods without a word, I tried to discreetly use some Wind Magic. Unfortunately, I couldn’t make air bullets, and my air cutter attack only had an effective range of twenty feet.
Hmm. I had my doubts about long-distance Earth Magic, but I tried putting both hands on the ground and channeling my power toward the monsters. When it was right under their feet, I unleashed a spell, muttering “Earth Lance!!” in a stage whisper. It was highly effective. *Goblin skewers, anyone?*

There were a few major flaws with this attack. I couldn't use this magic and Movement at the same time. I needed to concentrate on my presence detection just to be able to attack, so it took a long time to kill each monster. It was an inefficient use of magic, overall. That did nothing to pass the time!
I raised my hand.
"Class Rep, it's actually getting dark, so can you please permit the good students to leave early?"
"Leave for where? None of us have a home to go to, and we have been trying to figure out what to do," Class Rep said. "Where have you been staying?"
Oh, that's right. The camp was in shambles. A few of the tents were still usable, but the lecher delinquents would definitely be keeping an eye on that area. And the girls were definitely beyond peacefully negotiating with the delinquents.
"Uh, I'm going to my house?"
"What do you mean, 'my house'? Did you grow up in this fantasy world?!"
"Err, I had some free time, so I built it."
The girls huddled together for another group discussion.
"And how many people does it fit?" the Class Rep asked.
"No clue. I mean, I've been living by myself, and the only company I've had were the nerds."
Was this some apartment hunting survey? Was she going to try to buy my place off me?
"Let's put it this way: We could squeeze multiple people into the area of one tatami mat, right?" the Class Rep said, scratching her head. "Even if your home is small, we could make it work. About how many tatami fit in your home?"
I honestly didn't know. Living alone meant that I had no need to figure out how many people can be stuffed in there. One tatami mat was about six feet by three feet, which meant my cave could probably fit around forty tatami mats.
"Of course, if it's really cramped, we could fit five or six people per tatami if they slept sitting upright," the Class Rep added.
Six people per tatami would have been ridiculously packed! Were they students or sardines?
"If you're doing six people per tatami, I could probably fit two hundred and forty people," I said. "At five per tatami, about two hundred people. If I moved the furniture out of the way, maybe a few more. The only difficult things to move would be the built-in appliances in the kitchen, the bathtub, and the toilet, so…"
"T-two hundred and forty people?! What kind of luxury life are you living?!" exclaimed Class Rep. "You've been living by yourself in a forty-tatami mansion?! You even have the bath and the toilet in separate rooms? What have you been doing in this world?!"

“Living my life? I ended up constructing a bunch of extensions.”
“Why are you living so luxuriously in a fantasy world? We’re all desperately struggling to survive while you build yourself a literal palace?!”
For some reason, all the Class Reps were upset about the specs of my listing. If they were that picky about where they lived in a fantasy world, they would have no hope of finding a good apartment in the real world.
“Haruka-kun, please!”
“Please!” they all cried.
Oh no…what’s happening? The Class Rep and her friends bowed their heads in earnest plea. Were they trying to get some insider information about local rental properties? There’s only one apartment in the area!
“I know after what happened to Oda and his friends, it’s selfish of us to ask…” the Class Rep trailed off. “But just for today, could we please stay at your place?”
Stay at my place?! A giant group of high school girls staying at one loner guys’ place?! Girls nowadays will do the most shameless things! I knew we were in a depraved fantasy world, but that kind of scenario broke all the boundaries of propriety!
“I promise we’ll take care of everything: taking watch, getting food, cooking, cleaning, tending the fire. I won’t let the situation with Oda repeat itself. I know that you might not fully trust us. But still, please!”
I didn’t know what she was getting at. Obviously without enough tents, and with the base camp ruined, they didn’t have a place to stay. That was the only issue here as far as I was aware. After what happened with Oda, she must have felt obliged to offer to do more.
Granted, the nerds made the camp, raised the defenses, set up tents, made campfires, acquired and prepared food, cleaned, protected the camp, sat up for watch, fought away monsters…basically everything. The girls *made* them do everything. They were only alive today because they all lived there under the nerds’ protection. Yet, they still exiled the nerds from their own camp.
Technically, the nerds ran away voluntarily, but that made no difference. In the end, the nerds were exiles.
Naturally, they had no right to *demand* that I share my home with them. From their perspective, I had no reason to trust them, so they couldn’t just ask without first promising to do things differently.
“I’m sure that you were upset when you heard what happened to Oda,” the Class Rep said. “Of course you would be. And…and I wouldn’t blame you if you got upset with us now for asking you. But still…”
“Class Rep,” I said.
“Yes?”
Obviously, a group of high school girls wouldn’t last long on their own if you just threw them into the middle of the woods. On top of that, they had to deal with strange food and terrible monsters. No one would expect them to flourish in that scenario. Even I knew that.

Still, I couldn't just bring them in. They had to learn how to survive on their own. They'd only survived thanks to the nerds so far, and that made things worse in the long run. This time, they had to learn how to be independent.
"You can't possibly do what you promised all by yourself, right?"
Class Rep suddenly trembled. She looked down and forced herself to smile, a smile so sad I could hardly bear to look at it.
"Y-yeah, yes. Of course. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's…it's your property after all. I was being inconsiderate. I'm sorry."
"No, I'm saying *of course* you can't do it all yourself!" I shouted. "We're just a bunch of high school students dumped out in the middle of the forest and told to survive! There's no way you can do everything yourself! So why do you insist on doing everything?! It's impossible!"
"But we have to!" Class Rep replied. "We need to do more! After everything Oda and you have done for us, we need to learn to handle it ourselves. Otherwise, we won't survive!"
"But I'm telling you it's impossible!"
"I *know* it's not impossible…" Class Rep trailed off. "We can do it, because we have to! This time we'll prove to you—"
"Im-poss-i-ble! That's just the truth. What kind of high school students could survive being stranded in the untamed wilderness? Super weird, atypical ones, and that's it! So I'm telling you to do what you can, but nothing more than that! Am I mad about what happened to the nerds? Yeah, I'm hopping mad. I'm mad at them for trying to do everything themselves! And I'm mad at you too, Class Rep, for running yourself ragged trying to help everyone! I'm mad at everyone! I'm hardly surprised by your choices, but I'm still pissed! I'm mad at you for trying to do too much!"
The Class Rep couldn't hold back her tears any longer. She had been trying to take responsibility for everyone and everything, even the things that were far out of her control. Yet she couldn't bear to give up or let anyone down. She broke down sobbing.
Should I do something?
She *had* managed to lead everyone until now. If she hadn't, none of them would have survived.
We started walking through the forest toward my cave.
"Haruka-kun, why are all the monsters around here impaled like that?" the Class Rep asked, looking around.
"Uh, I had nothing to do while you all talked, so…"
"Huh? In what world does someone just impale all the monsters in a forest out of boredom?"
"Hey, it could've been a vampire prince or something, right? It's a fantasy world, after all," I suggested helpfully.
"There was *not* a vampire! So far, the only people we've met came from our class, and I know that none of them are vampires!"
"Impressive. Do you really remember the names of everyone in our class?"
"If someone were Count Dracula, I think I would've noticed!" she cried.

“Well, it’d be tough to tell, because his name would show up as Dracula A or something, and you wouldn’t notice anything suspicious,” I countered.
“No one is named like that! There aren’t *multiple* Count Draculas! What, are they all dressed the same, too?!”
Wow, I still know how to talk to people, I thought. After being alone for so long, it wasn’t easy, but I was managing. For some reason, the Class Rep looked tired, though. Maybe all that crying wore her out?
“Turn left at the corner,” I said.
“There are no corners in a forest!” Class Rep exclaimed. “Did you build an intersection with a traffic light? Did you make a convenience store, too?”
Oof. It was just a joke, but she returned it flawlessly. OHKO.
We arrived at the cave.
“Welcome to my home,” I said, “visitors from faraway lands—”
“Haruka-kun, you realize you were walking with us the whole time?”
“I’m just trying to show some hospitality!”
I beckoned all twenty of them inside. My loner self could hardly believe it. I should’ve done some more construction to expand the place.
Everyone cried out as they entered.
“What on earth is this place?!”
“It’s just my house?” I said. “Uh, thanks for coming?”
Maybe a cave was no good after all? Or were all the club decorations turning them off?
The Class Rep came up to me. “Uh, Haruka-kun? This place…it’s like a semi-underground Mediterranean resort. It looks like it was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. What—what is this place?”
“Uh, it’s my house. Was my greeting wrong? How about *bonjour*?”
“This is another world! How the hell did you build this place?!” she cried. “Besides, Frank Lloyd Wright spoke English, not French!”
I guess the Scream of the Class Rep series would continue even in my own home. She was undeniably passionate.
“I guess I had a lot of free time since I was always by myself…” I trailed off. “I kind of just ended up building all this.”
All twenty of them narrowed their eyes at me. *That’s…kinda hot. Uhh, forget I said that.*
I guess I better make more room for them, I thought. I used Earth Magic to carve out some more space and ran into a vein of quartz crystal. Using Earth and Packing Magic in combination, I made some glass for a skylight and some more tables. There was also some rock that kind of looked like limestone, and when I tried messing around with it using Earth Magic, I figured out how to turn it into whitewash and painted all the walls white. I figured that was good enough.
Everyone looking at me was beginning to creep me out, so I used Wood Magic to make a few big beds for everyone. Surely, this was more than enough space for twenty people. I needed a break from the staring girls, so I retreated to the kitchen and used all the mushrooms available to make a

feast. I set it out on the dining table. As a final measure, I got some hot water going for the bath.
“I’m sure you gals will feel more comfortable without a guy around, so enjoy,” I said. “See ya.”
I headed toward the mouth of the cave.
“Where are you going?” the Class Rep asked. “If we end up chasing you out of your own home, that’s no better than what happened with Oda-kun and his friends. Besides, I wanted to thank you for preparing everything—the food, the bath, even the beds.”
I shrugged. “Well, it’s my house, right? Isn’t a host supposed to show hospitality?”
“Still…”
“Like I said before, just do what you can. After all, you were attacked by a bunch of guys before finding me, right? By the way, you don’t need to worry about monsters in here, they don’t come near the cave.” I nodded. “Anyway, you must be exhausted, so…good night?”
Before anyone could respond, I ran out. *A flawless exit strategy! Alone at last!* A loner like me could definitely not handle being surrounded by so many girls.
I felt stifled in that cave, surrounded by the distraction of twenty girls all giving me their most withering stares. *This is better. I’m just a teenage boy, after all, and no teenage boy could survive that situation.*
I happily set up my tent outside and tumbled into it. The joy of solitude and release that I felt—only a loner could understand! As a shut-in, it hurt to have to abandon my home, but at least I still had this tent thanks to the mysterious Villager A. Something about Villager A always felt strangely familiar, even though I’d never met him. The tent could change size when it was deployed, kind of like his bottomless bag. Its size range was anywhere from a normal tent to one of those yurts that could comfortably fit several adults inside. I set it up but soon regretted not making it bigger.
After a minute, the Class Rep followed me into my cramped tent. She had to stand extremely close to me.
“Haruka-kun, thank you for everything,” she said. “Everyone seems to have calmed down now. The nice place, the good food, and the bath really cheered us up.”
“Er…you’re welcome,” I said vaguely.
“And we’re terribly sorry for taking over your place. You must want to at least take a bath, right? I don’t think you can tonight because everyone already undressed and fell asleep. So…look, I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”
My humble house has turned into paradise. A paradise of high school girls sounded very suspicious. I couldn’t even guess how expensive it would be to enter such a fabled realm. Even though it was my own house, I’d still be willing to pay! *Please, let me back in!*

“It’s fine, I washed up earlier,” I said. “I can’t be the only guy in there anyway, it’s just too much for me.”
“That makes sense. I’m genuinely sorry. Thanks again.”
“Class Rep, you’re starting to sound like a broken record. You keep repeating ‘sorry’ and ‘thank you.’”
“I don’t know what else to say. We were helpless yet again, and you saved us, and I still can’t do anything. We’re treating you no better than Oda-kun and his friends…”
I don’t think she quite gets it, I thought. It’s not the same situation at all.
“You are,” I told her. “You’ve been doing amazing things this whole time, haven’t you? You’ve been protecting fourteen other girls. You’ve kept everyone organized and on track this whole time. You ask everyone how they’re feeling, find your way through any situation, and make tough choices. You’ve kept everyone alive and together, haven’t you? This should be way too much responsibility for one person, but the others followed you, and you’ve protected them until now. Don’t say that you can’t do anything. You’ve done so much.”
“But what about Oda-kun?”
“I’m telling you, the nerds are fine. They’re all wired weird from being nerds, you know. Did you know that they’ve been practicing survival training in case they were ever summoned to a world like this? They were walking around with pocket knives just in case something like this ever happened! They brought LED flashlights, too! They had whole meetings to prepare for all kinds of fantasy scenarios! Obviously, the rest of us wouldn’t do something like that. Back in the real world, that kind of thinking was nuts. Only now, in this world, could their behavior seem rational. I’m glad you weren’t prepared. You’d have to be as nuts as them to prepare for this!”
“Don’t be so mean to them,” the Class Rep said. “They worked so hard.”
“But they’re still absurd for having prepared so much for this,” I said. “You think they were trying hard in school? No, they were waiting—hoping—for a world like this to show up. Can you imagine if schools taught students how to survive being summoned to a fantasy world? That’s ridiculous, right? They’re just weirdos who got lucky.”
It was like preparing your whole life for winning the lottery. It wasn’t normal. If you actually won, you looked like a farsighted genius, but the ones who didn’t win just ended up looking ridiculous.
“Still, thank you, Haruka-kun,” Class Rep said. “I feel a lot better. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to thank you properly. You’re pretty incredible.”
“No, no…I was just doing what I could, y’know?” I blushed. “I mean, loners usually have a lot of time on their hands.”
Groups came with a lot of benefits, but they came with drawbacks, too. They needed rules to function smoothly. Alone, you might be limited in what you could do, but you weren’t tied down. My classmates’ camp fell apart because they couldn’t handle following the rules—honestly, they didn’t set

many rules in the first place. The nerds just did things however they wanted and set things up the way they liked without consulting anyone else.
Can't figure out the group dynamics? Might as well just do whatever you want. That's what the nerds believed. Of course, taking the initiative like that leads to complications and you're just as likely to end up doing nothing. The nerds' plan was the opposite of teamwork—they didn't try to cooperate at all, just assumed they knew best and did stuff without thinking about the whole group.
On the other hand, the Class Rep was so concerned with the group's overall health that she struggled to push anyone out of their comfort zone. With the nerds already doing most of the necessary work, there was no urgency about learning to survive. It was the nerds who made it impossible for them all to pull together.
"You collected so much food, made an incredible home, defeated so many monsters—you can do anything!" the Class Rep said, beaming. "You might actually be weirder than Oda-kun and his friends."
She playfully flicked my cheek. Ouch! That's not fair! She's destroying all my defenses with concentrated cuteness! And how am I weirder than the nerds?!
"Lots of food, but it's all mushrooms. The house just came from all the free time I had, and all the monsters around here are weak," I said. "I'm not like the nerds! I'm totally normal!"
She was clean and clear-skinned, and her hair was still wet from the bath. The Class Rep stood achingly close to me. *Only because the tent is tiny, but still!*
"Normal, hm? Then don't you think everyone will be able to live happily here together?"
"I mean, if you just need the bare minimum to be happy, then sure?"
She eventually left the tent, but not before thanking me profusely again. It was so late at night. I'd set up my tent in front of the cave opening, so I decided I'd better keep watch just in case. *I should've built my cave further underground and saved myself the trouble of keeping watch.*

DAY 12
MORNING
No one normal would call that a solution.
THE TENT IN FRONT OF THE CAVE

"GOOD MORNING, Haruka-kun! Breakfast is ready, wake up!"
Huh? Breakfast? What's happening? When I opened my eyes, I saw a girl leaning over me. The beautiful girl next door? Her cute sister? No, not that…but seriously, who is this? Not that it really makes a difference!
The tent was certainly cramped, but not so cramped that she needed to be practically on top of me! *Her face…it's so close to mine!*
"Oh, good morning. I'm up…er, can you give me thirty minutes?"
"That's what people say right before they fall back asleep. You don't want to get up?"
More like I literally couldn't get up—both from a purely mechanical perspective and a hormonal teenage male perspective.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked.
“Grilled fish and mushrooms.”
I leapt up immediately, sending the girl flying out of the tent.
“Grilled fish?! Where?! Give it to me! Gimme gimme gimme! I need fish!”
“Calm down! You just knocked me over, and you’re not going to say anything?!”
“That doesn’t matter right now! Just tell me where you got the fish from!”
“It’s just fish! You still haven’t apologized!”
She passed some grilled fish over to me, and I chowed down.
Fish. Wholesome, delicious fish.
“Er, are you crying?” she asked.
“It’s fish!” I wailed. “Sweet, glorious fish!”
“You do realize you’ve been living next to a river?”
“I know that! Every day I stared longingly at the fish as I choked down my mushrooms…”
The girl looked at me like I was insane.
I couldn’t believe it, but it sounded like Class Rep and all the girls had been eating nothing but fish. *So. Jealous.* Apparently that was the only food they’d been able to obtain. One of the girls had Thunder Magic, so catching fish was easy for them. Unfortunately, they didn’t have any salt to season it. When the nerds were around, they told me that they hunted deer or boar occasionally, but their staple protein was fish. They couldn’t collect mushrooms because of all of the goblins nearby, so mushrooms were a rare delicacy to them. They wanted salt more than anything, however. *Damn. If I had realized earlier, I could’ve traded away my mushrooms and salt at a huge markup.*
She told me that the girls had cried yesterday over the luxury of a mushroom and herb stir-fry.
Any successful country depended on trade. My isolationist policy cost me a potential fish windfall.
For some reason, every single one of them gave me a fish. To thank them, I made and shared some juice. They made a huge fuss out of enjoying it. Some of them even shed tears as they drained their cups.
“Did you guys decide what to do?” I asked the Class Rep. “If you’re going to settle down here, maybe I should do some remodeling?”
I thought I could base my renovations on the old Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. With all the stone, I figured I could pull it off. *I’ll become the Frank Lloyd Wright of cave renovation!*
“No, there’s no need for that,” she said. “We haven’t made any final decisions, but we’re thinking about leveling up a bit and then trying to find the town.”
“Oh yeah,” I said, “the mean girls were trying to hunt down the nerds in town, I think?”

“I told you twenty times that we’re going to *apologize!*” shouted the Queen Bee. “What’s wrong with you! We’re not going to hunt them! And his name is *Oda*! And we’re *not* mean girls!!”
“Haruka-kun, you don’t want to find the town?” asked the Class Rep.
“Living in a town sounds like a pain,” I said. “I don’t mind visiting, but I wouldn’t want to move there.”
“Normally it’d be more of a pain to try to survive in the forest surrounded by monsters,” the Class Rep said. “But with a setup like this…”
“Oda-kun told us that anyone who wants to can become an adventurer in town.”
“I’ll pass,” I said. “I’ll never be strong enough to be a real adventurer, anyway.”
Everyone stared at me in total bafflement, so I explained how I’d gotten all my terrible skills.
“That doesn’t make any sense!” the Class Rep said. “Someone without any proper skills shouldn’t be able to take out an entire pack of level 5 kobolds, including the chieftain.”
“Kobold chieftain? Who’s that? One of the Queen Bee’s friends?”
“I’m not friends with kobolds!” the Queen Bee cried. “And how many times do I have to tell you that we’re not mean girls?! Do I still show up as ‘Queen Bee’ in your status?!”
She was so loud and obnoxious. Why did she always seem to be right behind me when she started yelling?
“Oh yeah, I forgot to give this to you,” said the Class Rep. “Here you go. This was the kobold chieftain’s bracelet.”
A bracelet? *It looks a lot like the one I have. Wait a second, they make a matching set!* A single person wearing both pieces from a couples set was definitely a little weird, but maybe it was appropriate for a loner.
“The bracelet gives you a speed bonus when you charge it with magic,” she said.
“Speed bonus?” I showed her my other bracelet. “But this one raises my power by one percent, yeah?”
“I see. You took out the leader of the goblins, too,” she said. “Defeating the boss goblin gives you a bracelet with a power bonus, whereas the kobold chieftain’s bracelet grants a speed bonus. That’s how Oda-kun and the others explained it to us, anyway.”
Wait, were the leaders of the goblins and the kobolds a couple?
“Boss goblin? Another one of the Queen Bee’s coworkers?”
“Stop! Stop lumping me in with them!” the Queen Bee cried. “I told you a hundred times, I’m *not* any kind of monster! Do I look like somebody who’d go to a conference for boss monsters?! And we’re *not mean girls*! Why don’t you get it?!”
Yeah, even monsters wouldn’t want to hang out with someone so noisy, I thought. And all the kobolds are probably too terrified to attend a monster conference, knowing you’d be there.

“I don’t get it. How are you even strong enough to beat boss monsters at level 5?” the Class Rep asked. “We couldn’t take out those kobolds even using our overpowered skills. How did you manage it?”
I hoped that I didn’t look as stupid as I sounded. “Well, I attack them until they die?”
“Yes, that’s how it usually works, but most people wouldn’t call that a strategy.”
Why is everyone looking at me like that? Was this what it meant to be popular? Wait, no, they were looking at me like there was something wrong with me. Did I say something wrong? How else were you supposed to defeat monsters? Attacking them until they die was the only real strategy, right?
“I’ll show you how to catch some fish,” said Vice Rep B with a wink. “Watch and learn!”
She raised her right hand, and an orb of electricity appeared, almost seeming to bounce from her hand. *Why do I think of bouncing whenever I look at her?*
“Don’t move!” I shouted. “Stay just like that!”
“What? Why? What are you doing?”

I took the orb of electricity that Vice Rep B made with my Packing Magic and held it. *Yes! Can I make it move?*
I slowly repositioned the ball of electricity above the river and flung it down at a fish. *Yes!* The fish floated to the surface of the water.
“I did it!” I cried. “I caught a fish! And used Lightning Magic!”
When I checked my status, sure as can be, “Lightning Magic” was listed there.
“What just happened? How?” Vice Rep B asked. “How did you take my magic?”
Vice Rep B jumped over toward me. *So much…motion.*
“Haruka-kun, what did you do?” the Class Rep asked. “Also, where do you think you’re looking?”
Class Rep was giving me a vicious evil eye. *That’s bloodlust if I’ve ever seen it!*
“I’m not looking at anything, okay? I was just studying her…Lightning Magic? I’m not doing anything suspicious, right?”
“Why does every sentence you say sound like a question?” The Class Rep shook her head. “Anyway, what kind of magic was that?”
“Oh, that was Packing Magic. I can use it to pack things up and move them, and then I learn a corresponding form of magic from that. I mean, that’s how it happened before, probably?”
“Wait, it allows you to learn any kind of magic just like that? That’s totally a cheat skill!”
“No, the learning is probably just a side effect of Master of None. According to the skill description, I can learn skills easily but they rarely level up. That makes sense, right?”
“That’s plenty amazing that you can just learn any type of magic so easily,” she said. “And it’s functionally anti-magic!”
“Anti-magic?”
“Yeah. If someone uses magic on you, you can counter it, right? Flinging back your enemy’s magic back at them is called anti-magic. It’s an amazing skill. Well, at least that’s what Oda-kun said.”
“I’m not sure that I could use it to block an attack or anything,” I said. “It takes time to control someone else’s magic with Packing.”
Still, she was on to something. Infusing my own body with magic used to be slow, but now I could do it in an instant. Maybe I could develop anti-magic techniques through practice.
But right now, I had bigger fish to fry, literally! I also had to practice my Lightning Magic, finish expanding my underground bunker, and I hadn’t had time to check my stats lately. *Besides, I’m not fulfilling my duties as a loner!* Even though I was a shut-in, I had gone outside; even though I was a NEET, I had helped the mean girls level up; and even though I was a loner, I had invited twenty high school girls over, protected them and showed them the ways of mushroom gathering.

I set out, and the high school girls paraded after me, whacking all goblins that had the misfortune of crossing their path.
Whenever we ran into goblins, I disarmed them—lopping off their arms when I didn't just send their clubs flying—and the parade of high school girls behind me finished them off. This was my first time going out with girls. *Nothing more romantic than killing goblins in the forest. What a murderous picnic.*
How monotonous; our itinerary was apparently goblin killing, goblin killing, mushroom foraging, mushroom foraging, goblin killing, mushroom foraging, goblin killing, and more mushroom foraging. *This is not the romantic picnic date I dreamt of!*
"Hey, Haruka-kun," said the Class Rep, sidling up to me. "How are you cutting goblin arms off with a stick? Isn't it blunt?"
"Oh, the nerds taught me that. They explained that Cane Mastery works best when I 'stab like a spear, swing like a halberd, slash like a longsword.' So that's how I do it."
"Just by thinking about it? I don't think that expression was meant literally."
"When Haruka-kun rescued us, he was using magic left and right," said one of the mean girls. "You're a mage, right?"
"Er, technically, I'm unemployed."
"Oh, right."
"You said that you don't have any proper skills, but I've seen you move so fast it seemed like you were teleporting—are you sure you're not using Super Speed or Ground Shrink?" Class Rep asked.
"He's obviously using Ground Shrink!" somebody called over.
"I think you're just talking about Movement and Walking?" I asked.
"You're telling me a skill that makes you better at walking actually gives you extra Movement Magic?"
"I guess it's some kind of combination of abilities—does that make sense?"
"You keep downplaying your skills, but they're obviously working for you," said Class Rep. "I wonder what you'd consider a *real* cheat skill."
We had too many people to go rabbit hunting—all the rabbits got scared off. So we just kept walking, taking out the occasional goblin as we went.
Whenever we ran into larger groups of monsters, I whittled them down from afar before closing in to finish them off. All the other girls had split up into "mean girl" and "vice rep" groups, so I was alone with the Class Rep.
"Hmm, we're bound to run into a level 15 monster if we keep going this way," I said. "Should we?"
"Can you handle it?"
"What if I sneak up to it and then unleash everything I've got? Do you think that would one-shot it?"
"I see now," she said. "We were all fighting them as monsters, but you've been thinking of it as hunting them like wild game. It makes for a one-sided fight."

“Well, since I have no cheat skills, wouldn’t they just kill me if they got a chance to attack? I’m honestly kind of weak.”
“Even with cheat skills, I think it’d be too dangerous. Let’s turn back,” she decided.
“Roger that,” I said. “Let’s detour around any high-level monsters and focus on taking out the weak ones.”
“At this rate, we’re going to make goblins an endangered species!”
“Oh, don’t worry. They’ll be back tomorrow.”
“You sound like you’ve tried to wipe them out before…”
We hunted goblins until the sun dipped below the horizon. Then, we went back to the cave. *No extracurriculars for me!* I was a proud member of stay-at-home club for eleven years now.
“Good work today!” called the girls as we entered the cave.
“Uh…g-good work?”
Everyone looked exhausted. *Better refill the bath.*
I poured fresh water into the bath and, using Heat Magic, instantly brought it to the perfect temperature.
“Bath time! Yay!” shouted the girls.
They stripped off their clothes as they raced toward the bath. They’ve lived in the forest for too long! What a horde of lawless barbarians, I thought. Are they going to trade their feminine wiles in for rippling muscles, too?
“Don’t get undressed before my innocent eyes!” I shouted. “This is sexual harassment!”
I escaped to a recently built storage room and worked on expanding it. *A twelve-tatami room could fit eight people, so would four rooms be enough?* I built one room, connected it to the hallway, and built the second. My consciousness began to fade from using up too much MP.
I began to stumble back to my tent in a daze when I heard the Class Rep’s voice.
“Haruka-kun, wait a second! Everyone, please keep your clothes on—”
My female classmates must have formed a barbarian clan of nudists, I thought. So much for being dignified, mature teen girls—they’d gone totally feral. And the Class Rep was acting like their mother, trying to civilize her unruly children.
“Okay, you can come out now. Dinner is ready!”
Yep, she’s the spitting image of a mom.
I had fish for dinner again, but all the girls had an enthusiastic mushroom party. *Something about that sounds inappropriate.*
“What were you doing in there, Haruka-kun?” Class Rep asked, a note of suspicion in her voice.
“Oh, uh, expanding my house? Construction? Excavation? New rooms?”
“Yeah, of course. You need a room you can call your own. Sorry for really taking over your place.”

“Oh no, those rooms are for all for you,” I said. “I couldn’t make everyone a private room, but I managed eight rooms, and I figure you can split them up. I mean, you must’ve felt so cooped up together this whole time, right?”
The moment I said that, the girls immediately rushed to check out their rooms, with the class mom staying behind to scold them.
“Wait, are you going to sleep outside again?” the Class Rep asked. “If you made all those rooms, why don’t you sleep here?”
“No way! I can’t. Everyone was totally naked like five minutes ago and I’m a guy! Those lecherous creeps tried to attack you before, right? Everyone feels safe right now, and I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable or anxious.”
“Thank you, I genuinely appreciate it. We really don’t want to inconvenience you.” The Class Rep thought for a moment. “Hmm, I don’t think anyone would mind if it was just you?”
“N-no way!”
Even that brief glimpse of the girls in a state of undress was way more than I could handle. The delinquent guys didn’t actually catch them, but there was no way they would be comfortable around me so soon after that.
“All right, I’m gonna head out,” I said. “Thank you for the meal!”
I set up my tent outside. Remembering the awkwardness this morning, I made it larger than it was yesterday.
If I haven’t leveled up by now, I’m going to be seriously pissed, I thought as I pulled up my status.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 07
JOB: —
HP: 93
MP: 92
VIT: 91
POW: 89
SPE: 87
DEX: 87
RES: 96
INT: 99
LUK: Max (Above Limit)
SP: 97
COMBAT SKILLS: Cane Mastery Lv6, Evasion Lv4, Foresight Lv3, Magic Infusion Lv4
MAGIC: Heat Lv4, Movement Lv6, Weight Lv4, Packing Lv5, Four Elements Lv4, Wood Lv2, Lightning Lv1
SKILLS: General Health Lv2, Sensitivity Lv3, Calisthenics Lv4, Walking Lv6, Servitude Lv3, Appraisal Lv4, Clairvoyance Lv3, Presence Detection Lv4, Enemy Tracking Lv4, Magic Manipulation

Lv5, Presence Concealment Lv3, Stealth Lv3, Hiding Lv2, Map Lv3, Focus Lv4, Physics Resistance Lv2, MP Regeneration Lv3, Stamina Regeneration Lv2, Parallel Thinking Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In L4, NEET Lv3, Loner Lv4, Sorcerer Lv4
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv2, Master of None Lv3, Blockhead Lv2
EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Bag of Holding, Monster Bracelet Power +1% Speed +1%

Hell yeah, I jumped up two levels in one day; my stats are about to hit triple digits, I thought. I didn't feel any different while fighting the goblins today, but apparently I had leveled up after all. *It sucks that I've been in the forest for ten days, killing literally hundreds of monsters nonstop, and I've barely reached level 7.* The Class Rep had focused on helping the weakest members of her group level up, and even they were levels 16-21. Somehow, they left me in the dust.
If this kept up, I'd end up as the one holding everyone back. At least by that point all the girls should be strong enough to make it to town by themselves. These raucous days would soon be over.
"Haruka-kun, can we come in?"
Speaking of raucous. Even though I'd expanded my tent to a size that would easily hold four people, it was still cramped when a deluge of high school girls flooded in. *Welcome guests, all six of you.*
"Um, sure, what's up?"
The six girls were the Class Rep, Vice Rep A, Vice Rep B, Queen Bee, the Fish Girl who woke me up this morning, and—oh no—the first girl to get naked! *The worst possible girl to enter a guy's tent!*
"Well, we just came to thank you—well, not just that, we also came to apologize, and…" started Class Rep.
"First, I want to tell you something," said the exhibitionist girl. "I have to admit, I was kind of testing you earlier and I'm sorry about that. Chika wants to tell you something, too."
What's Chika?
Fish Girl spoke, "Oh, um, listen. This morning, I came to apologize to you. I felt responsible for kicking you out of your own home. But when I tried to say sorry, you got so excited about fish that you knocked me over."
"Oh, Chika is Fish Girl!" I exclaimed. "I thought 'chika' was some kind of bird call you all were practicing. You're not part of a birdwatching club?"
Five of them erupted in a chorus of shouts. "What the hell do you mean by Fish Girl?! Do you think Chika-chan's parents are fishermen or something?! Why do you insist on giving us weird nicknames?! Chika is a name, idiot! Where did you pull birdwatching from?!"
My classmates' comebacks are always critical hits. Is that a cheat skill, too?

“Well, she was the one who brought me fish, right? Besides, for all you know, there might be something fishy about her parents!”
“That’s not how names work! There’s nothing fishy about her family… probably! Besides, how could you shove a girl like that?!”
The Class Rep explained that Fish Girl—wait, not Fish Girl, her name was some sort of birdcall I think—was pretty shook up after getting attacked by the delinquents. The other girls were being protective of Fish Girl’s feelings, which is why they’d seemed so unhappy about my presence. So she’d come into my tent that morning to apologize for making me feel unwelcome in my own home.
The Class Rep always explained things in a way I understood through all this cacophony. Thank you for doing so much; thank you for being the class’s representative, mother-figure, and interpreter.
“Got it. I’m sure things were rough for you, Fish Girl, so don’t worry about it. Plus, I got fish.” *Grilled* fish, no less! I could never hold a grudge after that.
“How did she become Fish Girl?!” cried the other girls. “You really can’t remember anyone’s name for a second!”
Wait, her name isn’t Fish Girl? I thought we just finished talking about how her parents were fishy, hence Fish Girl.
I glanced at the Class Rep. “So, why was Nudist Girl also apologizing?”
“Who the heck is Nudist Girl? Where do you get off giving a girl a name like that?!”
“But she was naked!” I protested, gesturing at the exhibitionist.
“Fukunuki-san, were you naked?!”
“N-no, not exactly! I mean, it wasn’t a big deal! I was just getting undressed on my way to the bath and he saw me! Just a glimpse! Nothing more than that!”
Everyone sighed.
“I just overheard you guys talking about how the fish was ready and looked over at the wrong moment,” I said. “The mean girls and the nudist clan are downright terrifying.”
“Leave the mean girls out of this! They’re not relevant here. One more thing, they’re *not* mean girls!”
“The mean—er, I mean Shimazaki-san was just trying to protect you, Haruka-kun. Don’t you dare be mean to them!” Vice Rep B scolded me, shaking her head in disappointment. Other features of her body also shook when she did that. *No, I’m not staring! Please don’t glare at me, Class Rep! My eyes just wandered past! They didn’t linger!*
“Did you just almost call them—never mind,” Vice Rep A said, then cut herself off. She addressed the Queen Bee, “You were going to say something in his defense?”
They were all glaring at me. *I deny all accusations!*
“Like, even though you totally enthralled us, you didn’t take advantage of the situation to do anything gross or anything like that. In fact, you just left

us alone. You showed so little interest that you didn’t even bother to remember our names. So, I don’t think you’ll cause any problems. Um, like, wait a minute! What about the name thing? That’s totally a problem, right?” *So much for defending me!* The more they talked, the worse they made me sound. Now the girls were glaring at me again! I couldn’t handle it.

DAY 12
NIGHT
♦
THE CAVE
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

I COULDN'T BELIEVE that Haruka-kun still called me "Class Rep" in this other world. Worse, I still had to perform all the duties of one.

"That brings us to our last issue: what to do with Haruka-kun," I said.

"He might have a rotten personality and a terrible attitude, but I trust him."

I was surprised that she approved of him. Maybe she felt a mixed pride at being referred to as "Vice Rep A" rather than something demeaning.

"And even though it was my fault he got kicked out of his home, he forgave me," said Chika-chan, "because of the fish."

And he had Chika-chan's vote of support. Was that also because of the fish?

"Yeah, and even though I stripped naked where he could see me, he… totally…ignored me."

Was that a vote of confidence from Fukunuki-san, too? It sounded like she was also a little upset at his reaction. Her pride was totally shaken.

"He really pisses me off, but he helped us, too," said Shimazaki-san. "And he did, like, tell us we'd never be able to make it up to Oda-kun if we died. He believed in us. Then again, he enthralled us and he keeps calling us mean girls!"

She was with him in the first half, but then it all went downhill from there. I just wished he could remember anyone's names. *My name isn't Class Rep!*

Not everyone wanted to follow him, but no one objected to working with him, either. Everyone had their own perspective, but we all trusted, relied on, or otherwise felt grateful to him, I think? The bigger issue was with Haruka-kun himself. He said that he would just hold us back, because he only hit level 7 after fighting so many kobolds. He was uncooperative.

Even when I tried to tell him that everyone was fine with him no matter what level he was, he just told us that the nerds said the same thing. He said he was grateful for the offer, but someone with the Loner title couldn't join any party.

"If I do join you, I'm just worried I'll get a new title like 'Player' or something. Thanks, but no thanks," he said.

While his level was low, he was still ridiculously strong. He just didn't get that no one wanted to ditch him, even if he leveled up slowly. He came to help us when we lost our way, when we were faced with despair, when we were on the verge of giving up—he saved us every time. Our lives…and our spirits.

Since coming to his house, the other girls had started to smile again. All the depression and despair from before had evaporated.
Their eyes regained their sparkle, and they'd started believing in themselves and feeling hope for the future. He showed us how to live, the whole time acting like everything he'd done was obvious. He always said he was just living his life. Thinking like that made his life easier, so it became easy for the rest of us.
Couldn't there be some way to overcome the difference in our stats? Why did god curse Haruka-kun so terribly? According to Haruka-kun, god had flipped out at him because he'd kept mocking the deity—but why was Haruka-kun bullying god, anyway? He said that god had even gotten down on his knees…
Finally, after much pleading, he agreed to accompany us to town. Now I just needed a way to convince him to stick with us after that.
"Even though I'm awful at leveling up, it's not like I never level up at all," he said. "In two or three years, I'll probably reach level 20 or 30. At that point, I could probably survive in town, don't you think? Until then, I can manage by myself out here." He seemed cheerfully resigned to his fate, but I couldn't simply leave him alone in a cave for three years.
We were all summoned to this world suddenly and without warning. Before he got here, we had all moved on without him. Yet even though he was weaker than us, he not only managed to survive, but he *saved* us. I'd never abandon someone like that, no matter what his status said!
The rest of us will hit level 20 or even 30 soon enough, but Haruka-kun would take years to reach the same point.
God told us that levels in this world were paramount. Soon enough, we'd be strong enough to obliterate goblins and kobolds without even thinking about it. But Haruka-kun was something else entirely. Even though he was only level 7 and had no useful skills, he could take out hundreds of monsters without breaking a sweat! I couldn't even begin to imagine what he could do at levels 20 or 30!
He claimed that he was barely scraping by, and even if he was tough, all it would take was a single lucky blow to take him out. I wanted to keep him safe. We could protect him, just like he'd protected all of us. Just like he still protected us now.
That was why we needed to go out and level up. My guts were twisted in knots and my knees shook, but I knew that we needed to fight. Even under Haruka-kun's protection, we couldn't relax. If Haruka-kun couldn't get stronger, we had to become strong enough to protect him.
That was our plan, and the girls agreed unanimously.

I told them that kobolds bite, but no, they didn't listen to me.

DAY 13
MORNING
♦
INSIDE THE CAVE

FOR THE SECOND MORNING in a row, I ate delicious fish.

Fish Girl woke me up. *If her parents are fish, isn't feeding me fish messed up?* The girls were in high spirits again this morning, elated at the prospect of finding a town.

The nerds had acted like rowdy teen boys before leaving in search of a town, but the girls held so many girls-only meetings that I wondered what they were planning. Maybe they were like the nerds—planning to go after the wild beast guys that inevitably prowled in a fantasy world? Were some of them after the same shape-shifting raccoon dogs as the nerds? If any of them said they had a thing for cute young boys, I would have no choice but to file a police report all the same.

We set off, and after a while, we reached a deep part of the forest. Even the high-level goblins were no match for our group. Whenever they started to overwhelm us, I drove them back with a storm of fire bullets. No challenge, no excitement.

I prepared lunch while the rest finished off some goblins. I used Earth Magic to make a stone grill and cooked wild-caught fish with mushrooms using Fire Magic. The day I had dreamt of for so long had finally arrived. I wrapped the fish and mushrooms in herbs and let them poach in their own juices on the grill. The herbs mingled with the scent of the fish, giving it a refreshing and slightly astringent fragrance. With this flavor, I felt like I could fight for a whole year! *There's nothing wrong with liking fish!* The girls had raved about the food too, after all. Well, the mushrooms. That was ridiculous—the fish was clearly the best part!

We decided to hunt kobolds after lunch. We needed more practice against fast monsters, and they granted more experience. *I'm bored out of my mind!* We finished eating and began our hunt. *Running into a bunch of high-level ones could be bad. Let's stick to kobolds below level 10.* During lunch, the girls came up with a strategy for defeating kobolds. I warned them that, unlike goblins, they were fast, had a mean bite, and howled when in danger. Shortly after, we ran into a pack of kobolds—levels 6, 8, and 9. A perfect challenge to get the girls some practical experience. *Okay, time to test out fighting in a group. Let's do it!*

Within seconds, agonizing screams echoed through the forest. Before we could test out our strategy, the kobolds had sunk their teeth into several of the girls.

The quick kobolds easily broke our formation. Three kobolds managed to outflank our much larger group. *Is now a good time to panic?*
These kobolds didn't even have 40 speed. Just comparing stats, the girls should've been faster, but for some reason they couldn't keep up.
Eventually, the mean girls finished one off, uncannily calm again, but they still barely kept in formation. Everyone's stats were fine; their lack of experience fighting wild monsters was the real problem. *But that still doesn't explain why this is going so badly. What's going on?*
"Waaa, it hurts! They—they—they bit me!"
"Wh-what do I do? Do I—aah, what should I do?!"
"I can't do it! I can't get them!"
"Ahh… Huh?" Vice Rep B whipped around. "What's going on?"
Her sudden movements are too distracting. Uh, I'm definitely not looking, I'm focused on the kobolds! Flawless excuse!
I absolutely needed to step in, because I was worried about getting yelled at if I kept watching. *Especially if my traitorous eyes kept focusing on the wrong features.*
The level 9 kobold was the only one that had Pack Tactics. If not for that, the fight might have even been too easy. *Okay, the Class Rep is glaring at me, time to act!*
I had somehow gotten a skill called Parallel Thinking, presumably because I kept casting so many flame bullet spells at the same time. That would definitely not work here—the girls would be furious if I fired off a storm of bullets into this chaotic fray. I also needed to try out Four Elements magic and Movement magic since those skills had gone up several levels since I last used them. No need for Lightning Magic, though, since I'd practiced it plenty catching fish.
I hadn't tried Movement Magic at full force in quite a while, and I was scared that my inner Klutzy Anime Girl would reemerge when I tried. Cannonballing uncontrollably was embarrassing enough when I was alone—it would've been way more mortifying with the girls watching.
Instead, I backstabbed Kobold A with my stick. Rather than counterattacking, the kobold ran away from me. I gave chase. *Let's see how you like being hunted!* Whenever I caught up and stabbed the kobold, it started running faster and faster. *Just how fast can this thing go?* We ended up racing in circles around the group of girls.
Kobolds B and C couldn't keep up and were defeated by the mean girls. I caught a glimpse of the mean girls' eyes, empty and blood-curdling. I decided I'd pretend not to notice.
Without warning, Kobold A came to an immediate stop, swung around, and slashed with its claws. *Stupid, so stupid!* I couldn't stop on a dime like that! I didn't have time to do anything at all. In other words, my momentum carried me safely past the claws and unsafely crashing headlong into the monster. We somersaulted across the undergrowth in a tangle of limbs and snarls. At the moment of impact, I managed to thrust my staff into its skull,

killing it instantly. Compared to what the mean girls did to the other kobolds, it was a merciful death. I was exhausted.
We regrouped and resumed our strategy meeting. For some reason, they were all mad at me.
“Didn’t I tell you that they were fast?” I asked. “And that they bite and howl?”
“We can’t defeat monsters only knowing that!”
“Fast was a massive understatement!”
“How does saying ‘they bite’ count as giving good advice?!”
“And why were you running in circles with that kobold anyway?”
“What are we supposed to do with that info?”
What was this storm of criticism? Kobolds are fast and they bite. And they howl! What more do you want?!
“Well, all the nerds told me about them was that they’re blue, tall, slender, and have dog heads. That’s it! Saying that they’re fast and bite is way more help than I ever got! I even remembered to mention that they howl!”
They all shouted over each other in protest. Maybe furor was a more fitting term. Hell, you could even call it an uproar. *An uproarious furor, definitely,* I thought.
“The monsters upriver are weaker, but we might run into the guys there. Are any of you okay with that?”
Everyone fell quiet. Even the nerds had tried to get away from those guys.
Of course they’re not prepared for that encounter. I won’t make them go upstream.
Surely not *all* the guys had lost their minds, but there was no way of knowing or finding out which were still decent. It was safer to avoid them altogether and look for town. The guys wouldn’t be able to survive the deep reaches of the forest at their level; the only route they had left went past my cave.
If they found the cave, I could blockade it and stop them from getting to the nerds and the girls. That was a short-term solution, but I didn’t want to consider the long-term options. I wasn’t sure if I was capable of killing a person, but if it came down to it, I’d have to. From all I’d heard, they showed no signs of guilt, remorse, or regret. *I would have to make them regret their actions.*
Our meeting concluded with a new strategy: the girls should hunt pairs of low-level kobolds to start with. If there were three or more, or they were too strong, I was to jump in right away and help. I was banned from challenging them to footraces, playing tag, or engaging in any other shenanigans.
After spending the rest of the day hunting kobolds, the girls grew used to fighting. By dusk, one group could easily dispose of two kobolds by themselves. They all leveled up considerably, too.
Whenever we ran into goblins or kobolds on the way back, the girls handled them all on their own. They scanned their surroundings for threats,

maintained defensive formations, and neutralized their foes. *Soon, they'll be strong enough that I can retire,* I thought.
Back in the cave, I made beds and simple furniture for their rooms. They didn't plan on staying for much longer, but I figured that I ought to be a good host until they left.
By the river, one of the girls taught me Ice Magic. As usual, I got the knack for it using Packing Magic. I ate dinner, took a bath, and the day was already over. *I'd better make the tent gigantic,* I thought. *Not big enough for one…or four, or even eight. I'll make it large enough for twelve people.* It was practically a dome.
As soon as I set it up, the girls poured into it.
"Wow! Look at how, like, spacious it is!" said the Queen Bee.
"How is it a different size every time we visit?"
"It's way bigger than before," said Fish Girl.
"Hey, Haruka-kun," said the Class Rep. "I kind of told everyone to check out how big the tent was now."
"It's fine," I said. "There's mushroom tea."
Uh, why do they like mushroom tea this much? Did the tea start fermenting by accident or something? Are we about to have some sort of weird drunken rave? I decided to just observe from outside the tent. But when I tried to leave, they blocked the exit. Why not? Why can't I just watch from a distance? There's a bit too much skin in this tent for a high school guy to handle!
"Uhm, what's going on?" I asked.
"We're debriefing after the mission!"
For some reason, they all sat down in a circle. The Class Rep led the discussion, starting with an analysis of kobold stats. She sat so close to me that I could feel the warmth of her body. Next to her was Vice Rep A, sitting cross-legged in short shorts. *Those legs! Have to look elsewhere!* My gaze settled on Vice Rep B, nodding in agreement with Class Rep, and her assets nodding along with her… *It's a trap! Where am I supposed to look?!* Sitting directly opposite me, Vice Rep C and Nudist Girl were goofing off, playfully shoving each other and rolling around. Their skirts kept flapping as they tumbled. *What is happening?! I'm a pervert no matter where I look! It's a trap!*
Fish Girl and two others I didn't know sat to my left. I soon recognized them; they were the two muscle-head chicks from the volleyball team. The mean girls crowded in behind them. *Why do they always end up behind me? I'm totally hemmed in.* The girls from the literature club squeezed in next to them. *So cramped! A loner shouldn't be in this situation!* The Class Rep continued, "—and that's why we need at least one person to slow enemies down." *Class Rep, did you really need to invite this many people to a debriefing? The girls rolling around aren't even listening!* "All right everyone, next up…" *I'm supposed to be a loner…*

DAY 13
THE CAVE
♦
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

WE'D GATHERED to evaluate our recent reconnaissance mission. We'd called this meeting to develop a plan to keep Haruka-kun with us.
"He was, like, totally staring at us," Shimazaki-san said. "No doubt that he's interested in girls. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be into BL."
"Well, he's constantly ogling our chests and legs, that much is obvious."
"Ugh, I hate it when he stares. Don't you?"
Seeing a smile was rare since we came to this world. For so many days, there was nothing to smile about.
Arriving here, we finally felt like smiling again. Today was wild, but in the end, everyone was full of laughter. Haruka-kun made us feel at ease, even if he wasn't strong.
I didn't care that he was weak, I just wanted him to stay with us. His presence made it easy for us to smile. That's why we were working on a plan to persuade him to stick around.
"So he's not gay, but he barely reacts to us!" Fukunuki interjected.
"He's just worried about how we feel after we were attacked by the other guys," Chika said. "He's a little odd, but…"
"Is he a boobs guy or a legs guy? I couldn't tell, he just ogled everything equally. Hold on, is he into *both*?!"
"He doesn't get involved with anyone, not just girls. He probably wouldn't care if we left him behind."
Everyone sighed.
We continued our meeting late into the night. Other than confirming that he probably liked girls, we didn't make any progress.

DAY 14
MORNING
Uh, no, girls, I wasn't just muttering anything to myself.
THE CAVE

BREAKFAST! Bountiful fish! A festival of fish! Fish forever!

I would've loved a morsel of meat, but rabbits were impossible to find when there were so many people around. We hadn't seen any deer or boars either.

We also hadn't seen any orcs. They were like oversized goblins that were stronger, meaner, and even smarter.

That's a low threshold to cross—even fish are smarter than goblins!

But we—the girls and I—had to try fighting an orc at least once. An unknown enemy was frightening and dangerous. We needed to get familiar with fighting them.

I wasn't always going to accompany the girls. Eventually they would make it to town and take jobs as adventurers. For now, fighting together and building up experience was safer for all of us.

We traveled upriver after breakfast. There was a risk of running into the guys, but we weren't going near the original campsite, and there were high-level orcs in the area. I doubted that the guys would go anywhere near here.

We were getting close. I stayed vigilant by using Clairvoyance, Presence Detection, and Enemy Tracking. I also took the opportunity to secretly use Appraisal in search of new food. Naturally, I not only kept my eyes open for wandering monsters and animals but for humans as well.

The delinquents were cowardly, and the other guys who'd attacked the girls weren't high level, so no one was likely to come here. The Class Rep was here, anyway. She would take care of them no problem.

The meathead jocks were another matter entirely. According to the nerds and the Class Rep, they had kept curiously quiet. Maybe they had achieved a new level of brainlessness and could only act out of instinct and involuntary reflex.

Did they isolate themselves from the rest of the group? Or were they part of the group that attacked the nerds? I had my doubts. They were the kind of guys who blundered ahead without a thought. Whether they ran into monsters or off a cliff, they would just have kept going, forgetting that they'd encountered anything at all. In that way, they always seemed to end up involved in conflicts, even when it didn't have much to do with them. The way things went in the camp, I could've imagined them helping the nerds out.

Or this world might have changed them. In life-or-death scenarios, they might have learned to be cautious and paranoid. But they were probably way too dumb to change. *Way* too dumb.
I'd never seen an orc before, but if an orc was smarter than a goblin, then it'd also be smarter than the jocks. A meathead had barely any more intelligence than a goblin. Even that might have been too generous an assessment. Could they have changed? Become less gullible? Become skeptical of their surroundings? That was utterly unimaginable.
Perhaps, by some miracle, the meatheads had managed to rub their few neurons together and spark some thoughts. That was only speculation, but I knew that they didn't help the nerds or the girls before, so I should be wary of them.
At last, we found a solitary orc. The nerds' intel was accurate—orcs didn't travel in groups. There were no signs of other monsters or meatheads in the surrounding area.
"Stay hidden and keep an eye out, I'm going to try fighting it." I said.
I went forth alone. I needed to see it in action to learn how it fought and reacted. Practical experience was essential if I wanted to develop a strategy against orcs.
"Thanks, Haruka-kun," said Class Rep. "Be careful."
"Watch me closely," I said. "And no complaining."
I activated Presence Concealment and Stealth, and approached the orc. The nerds had told me that while orcs were physically powerful, the nerds had managed to defeat one with magical attacks. I used Appraisal.

Orc A
RACE: Orc
LV: 11
HP: 66
MP: 10
VIT: 59
POW: 63
SPE: 21
DEX: 16
RES: 10
INT: 8
LUK: 19
COMBAT: Hammer Mastery Lv4, Great Strike Lv4, Body Slam Lv3, Herculean Strength Lv3, Adamantine Lv2
SKILLS: Intimidate Lv2, Alpha Male Lv3
EQUIPMENT: Club

They weren't kidding about the strength. Its vitality and power far surpassed that of any goblin, and it had decent speed and dexterity, too.

Eight intelligence, huh? It was stupid but still way smarter than a goblin. *Probably smarter than the meatheads, too.* At the very least, my stats were higher, if not my level. No point in dithering; I had to attack.
I ambushed the orc, charging full tilt and swinging with all my might. I bashed it over and over with my staff. *Hyaaaaah!* Oh, did I kill it? This thing was supposed to be strong? The nerds told me orcs had high physical resistance! I couldn't have known this monster was a total pushover.
The girls clambered out of their hiding spots and immediately started complaining.
"What was the point of that?! We didn't learn a thing watching you! Sneaking up from behind and beating it till it dies—you think that's a viable strategy? The orc keeled over without even doing anything!"
It wasn't my fault the intel was misleading, I thought. Next time, I'll try magic. I doubted that anyone could object to that strategy.
The next orc was level 12, with similar stats to the previous one. The girls watched me from a safe distance as I snuck up behind it. *I could feel their eyes on me.* I had to stay focused; if I paid any attention to them, I would lose the fight.
I'd sprayed countless tiny fire bullets in previous fights, so I thought I'd try combining them to create a single blast.
I snuck up behind it and aimed at its back. I formed a single, giant fire bullet and infused it with magical power. As the magic poured in, it became denser, harder, stronger…*fire!*
The moment I shot the bullet, I immediately created another one. Again and again, I formed and shot flame bullets—an endless fiery onslaught. Fire echoed in my mind like a mantra. *Damn, did it die already?* I felt the girls staring daggers at me.
Didn't the nerds claim that they barely managed to kill an orc with magic? I was assured that it was crazy tough. *Can it really be dead?*
"It's dead!" the girls screamed. "It died after your first spell, and you blew its head off with the second!"
"I killed it?"
"You obliterated it!"
Can't we just move on? I'm trying to be helpful!
We looked for more orcs in silence. *Come out, come out, wherever you are!* I could feel the withering gaze of twenty irritated high school girls.
Alone with a giant group of girls in the woods, yet I only desired orcs. *Err, just forget I said that.* We found one before long. *Oh, how I have longed for you!*
"Okay, everyone, let's show some hustle! We'll give it our all and get this over with…I guess?"
Before I could finish inspiring them with my speech, the girls went flying through the sky. But not by using a skill—the orc sent them flying with mighty swings. It broke through their shield wall easily. Swords, spears, and arrows did no damage. Magical attacks slowly chipped away at its HP, but

the orc had too much HP to care. The healing corps had to rush all over, trying to keep everyone alive.
If I don't do anything, I'll get scolded again. I knocked its club out of its hands with a single flame bullet.
That wasn't enough. It was pawing at the girls with its bare hands. This looks bad. It has Alpha Male Lv3! Is it looking at the girls with eyes of rage…or lust?!
Before it did anything awful, I leapt at it, stabbing through the neck. *Well, if you consider poking something with a staff "stabbing."*
The orc was still on its feet, even as it clutched at its neck. I stepped aside so that the girls could finish it off. It was disarmed and heavily wounded, but they still struggled. After a little while, when they still hadn't killed the monster, I decided to leave them to it and work on lunch.
The weather was fair, and we were in the middle of the woods. That's it! I thought. It's the perfect day for a barbecue! We only have fish and mushrooms, but barbecue would really hit the spot!
"We're in the middle of a fight to the death with an orc, so why the hell can I smell something delicious?" someone yelled from the melee. "What makes you think now is a good time to grill some fish? Is that a table? Did you make a table and chairs?! Where did all those flowers come from?!"
At long last, they killed the orc. It was only level 9, but it took them so long!
I'm so hungry!
"Uhm, fighting that orc must have made you all hungry, right? Aren't these flowers pretty?"
"Yes, the flowers are pretty!" the girls yelled at me. "That's not the point!"
Were they mad at me? They were being totally illogical. We needed to eat, so I made lunch. They were happily eating the food I made even as they scolded me.
On the way back, they leveled up by fighting goblins and kobolds. They decided to get their revenge against orcs tomorrow.
The girls all discussed the battle after they finished lecturing me.
"So there really isn't any special technique to fighting them."
"I could try to cut off its arm…"
"We need magic bullets! Those are strong!"
"We should still come up with a more conventional strategy…"
They kept on having their girl huddles and strategy meetings all the way home. *I showed them how to beat the orcs twice!* Some girls were staring daggers at me—did I say that out loud?
"If we all try to attack at the same time, we just end up getting in each other's way."
"It's hard to cast magic when we're trying to retreat."
"We need to chop off its limbs first!"
"We can't afford to get too close. It has Alpha Male! Close-quarters combat is out of the question!"

They couldn’t decide on a strategy. Sometimes the simple strategy is best: just beat the crap out of it. Uh…I didn’t say anything! I’ll stay quiet!

The girls split up into four groups of five. They raised their levels by hunting goblins and kobolds until late at night.

The fights were so one-sided they weren’t even fights anymore, more like massacres. *Okay, I’ll quit criticizing.*

I was as quiet and timid as a rabbit. Speaking of which, I would love to eat rabbit. *Where are you, deer and boar?*

DAY 14
NIGHT
♦
THE CAVE
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

SINCE HARUKA-KUN couldn't get stronger, we needed to get stronger instead. We needed to protect him.
Well, that was *supposed* to be the premise of this meeting.
One of the girls shouted, "What the hell was that! Why?!"
"He was like an assassin! A berserker! That has to be his job. He's not unemployed!" another said.
"And he's saying he doesn't have any cheats. What does that mean? What the heck is a cheat, anyway?"
"God said that levels determine everything in this world. What did he mean by that?"
"Even though I'm a Swordfighter with a Sword Mastery skill, I couldn't cut the orc at all. How the hell did he dismember an orc with a wooden stick?"
"I have the Inferno fire spell, but I can't do what he did. He literally blew an orc's head off with a single spell!"
"He keeps insisting that there's no technique to killing them! His entire strategy is just beating them up until they stop moving."
"Protect him? We need *him* to protect *us*!"
Huh? Are we just not going to bother?
No, the plan hadn't changed—we still had to do it. *But why is he so strong?*

DAY 14
NIGHT
♦
IN FRONT OF THE CAVE
THE TENT

THIS TIME, I made the tent big enough for twenty people. Of course, now that there was enough room to fit everyone, no one came. *Turns out I'm a loner after all.* I was alone for the first time in a while. I checked my stats to pass the time.

I was up to level 8, my HP and MP were over 100, and the rest of my physical stats had reached triple digits as well. Appraisal, Clairvoyance, Presence Detection, Enemy Tracking, and all the other sneaky abilities were becoming my specialties. *Just what exactly am I trying to become? A stalker? An orc stalker?!*

I couldn't figure out what the Parallel Thinking ability did.

When I fought the kobolds before, I created a bunch of flame bullets and fired them in all directions. Did that count as a parallel attack or something? Besides that, I hadn't figured out how to use Magic Manipulation yet. I hoped it would become another ace up my sleeve.

I swore under my breath when I saw that Blockhead had leveled up, too. I suspected that had happened after the girls kept teasing me. *They must be talking crap about me behind my back. I wonder what they're saying now…*

DAY 15
MORNING
I should have known girls couldn't appreciate wabi-sabi.
IN FRONT OF THE CAVE
THE TENT

TODAY WE PLANNED to hunt orcs again. The girls were ready to get their vengeance. They worked hard yesterday, even staging a mock battle in preparation.

If they could beat an orc on their own, they'd feel ready to search for town as well, so they were highly motivated. The nearby kobolds didn't stand a chance against them, and they could easily face down a whole swarm of goblins. Only the orcs, the strongest monsters in the forest, remained undefeated.

Town probably had better weapons and people who could teach the girls how to fight. The girls, unlike me, leveled quickly, so if they managed to take down an orc, they had nothing left to learn from this forest. *Will today be the end?*

I decided to accompany them to town for numerous reasons. First, I wanted to see what it was like. Second, a group of twenty beautiful girls traveling alone would stand out. Even if they could defeat monsters, towns had thieves and other human foes that were probably more dangerous. Finally, the mean girls wanted to apologize and express their gratitude to the nerds. I wanted to see that happen. Hopefully, the nerds hadn't been driven out of town yet.

No one called me for breakfast, so I did some morning practice.

I moved around quickly and swung my staff at full speed, trying to stay in motion. *I'm so fast!* I didn't have much power or defense, so I had to be fast. I rehearsed combo attack after combo attack.

Having extended my staff, I held it in the center and stabbed to the left and right before finishing with a whirling attack. Then, I moved my grip to one end of the staff and whipped it in a wide overhead arc, shifted back to a center grip, and stabbed. Though I described the actions in discrete steps, it was actually a continuous flowing movement, with a ton of power behind it.

I kept moving. Each attack chained into the next one. I had to keep it up. Fighting like this, I could contend with a group of monsters even if they surrounded me. As long as I kept my energy levels up, I could keep stringing together fast, piercing attacks.

"Wow, you're on fire!"

I got so caught up in my training that I didn't notice the girls show up and start watching. Good thing I didn't strike a dorky pose at the end. *Wait…I didn't strike a pose, did I?*

“Haruka-kun, did you do martial arts back home?” asked Fish Girl.
She thought this was martial arts. It probably looked legit because I was remembering and imitating martial arts movies while I whipped the staff around.
“No, not really. I improvised my own style, I guess?”
“Really? It looks kind of familiar.”
I’m just imagining fights from action manga, but that’s a secret I’ll take to my grave. My victory pose, too!
“What about breakfast?” I asked. “What’re we having?”
“Fish, of course.”
Today is another splendid day. I love fish.
We went out to hunt goblins and kobolds, stopping for fish and mushrooms on the way.
“I think the monsters eat the mushrooms,” Class Rep said. “That’s why there are so many of them. They’ll keep coming back even if someone tries to exterminate them.”
That made a lot of sense. The plentiful HP and MP restoring mushrooms around my cave meant strong monsters kept showing up.
“A lot of mushrooms mean a lot of monsters, right? And all those monsters scare off the animals?” I imagined all the fresh meat I could’ve been eating.
“I have to kill all the goblins!”
We talked as we went deeper into the forest. Everyone else was already over level 30. The area around the cave was a great place to level up. Why was I was the only one left behind?
We finally found an orc, level 16. *Too strong?*
“There it is. Mind leaving it to me?” I asked.
“Sure,” the Class Rep replied. “Uh, please be careful?”
For some reason, even she’d started speaking in questions. *Was I a bad influence?*
Instead of sneaking or charging, I just ambled up to the orc. It attacked immediately, but I parried the orc’s swing with the right side of my staff. While it was off-balance, I spun around and swept its legs with the left end of the staff. It was unsteady but hadn’t fallen, so I feinted a stab at its eyes. When it raised its club in defense, I took another swipe at its exposed legs. While it was hobbled, I dodged the wild swings of its club and slammed the staff into the hand wielding the club. By focusing alternately on the eyes, feet, and main hand, I kept myself safe from counterattacks.
The Class Rep was concerned that they weren’t strong enough to take an orc out directly, but the girls just needed to target an enemy’s weak points to prevent it from retaliating. *As long as it can’t strike back, keep repeating that combo until it’s nearly dead and finish it off with a killer blow.*
I flung a ball of fire at the orc’s face and then thrust my staff spear-like into its eyes. After blinding the orc, I knocked the club from its hands. Limbs battered, unable to attack, it stumbled.

I called over to the Class Rep. “Your turn. Want to finish it off with a flourish?”
“Thank you, Haruka-kun,” she said. “Today you were actually helpful.”
Leaping out from cover, the girls surrounded the orc. I only switched out because I was sick of fighting the orc, but that’s my little secret.
Hold on, what did she mean by “today?” I didn’t do anything wrong yesterday!
It’s not my fault the nerds totally misled me! I thought. Come on, Class Rep. She trash-talks me even while saying thank you.
One of the girls shouted, “Everyone stand back! Now!”
The girls cast a powerful magic attack in unison. *A bit overkill if you ask me.*
“Great work,” I said.
I gave everyone some fruit juice, and they immediately gulped it all down. Girls act totally different when you offer them something sweet, I thought. Fast, too—did one of them use Ground Shrink or something?
The second orc we found was level 10. *A balanced fight.* The girls flanked the orc as they fought. Unlike yesterday, each of them understood their role and attacked carefully and methodically, choosing the right targets. The archers and magic users aimed for the eyes. If the orcs protected their eyes, others leapt in to attack its legs. And if it guarded its legs, others went for the club. They had a winning strategy: pierce the eyes, crush the hands, and slash the legs. By working so well together, they kept each other safe.
No one needed me just then, so I decided to make lunch for everyone. For some reason, everyone was upset about my barbecue yesterday, so I decided to make salty fish and mushroom stew.
They didn’t like the floral decorations either, so there was no chance in hell I’d make the mistake of using flowers again. Unlike the nerds, I could actually read the room. I needed a different approach. It needed to be more subtle. *Let’s go with a rustic Japanese style, wabi-sabi!*
I gathered dead trees and smoked them, washed the logs, and finished drying them with Heat Magic. Then I made tableware out of the rough-hewn wood. I used Packing Magic to precisely straighten out thin branches and then shaved them into chopsticks. I sliced a log and sanded the slices into plates and bowls. I used the remaining logs as the table and chairs. Just as I added my finishing touches, the girls won their battle.
“Welcome back,” I called. “I made lunch!”
I’d even had time to prepare a handwashing station.
A tumult of voices answered. “Everything smells delicious! But that’s beside the point! We were busy fighting, and you thought it was a great time to plan a picnic? What if something went wrong?”
Are they mad at me again? I should have known girls couldn’t appreciate wabi-sabi. Lodge your complaint with the chef. Wait a sec, I’m the chef! I didn’t get why they were mad at me all the time. Was it a side effect of Blockhead?

Even though they were exasperated with me, they still asked for seconds. At this rate, I was worried my new title would be Bullied Kid or something.
After lunch, the girls fought level 8 and 11 orcs in quick succession. Then we found a big one, a level 15. It leered at Vice Rep B. No wonder it was so sleazy, its Alpha Male skill was level 5!
“Wh-why is it looking at me like that?!” she cried.
“C-could it…could it be going after girls with…y’know, breasts?” the Class Rep said.
“Waaah! No! Stay back! That’s so gross!”
“Grr…it didn’t even look at me! It’s so dead!” the Queen Bee hissed in a stage whisper.
“It’s coming my way! Stop! Someone, help!” cried Vice Rep B.
“It must be *sooo* hard having your figure!” the other girls teased.
“Aah! Betrayal!”
The Queen Bee chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’ll kill this thing!”
“Why?” muttered Vice Rep A. “Why is it totally ignoring me?”
This is bad—everyone’s arguing. The orc was defeated eventually, but the girls’ friendships didn’t survive unscathed.
As the sun set, we started our trip back to the cave. *Everyone’s spoiling for an argument. I don’t like it!*
“Did that orc come from like the World of Boobs or something?!” asked the Queen Bee.
“I can’t believe it completely ignored me!” cried Vice Rep A.
“Your life must be *sooo* hard with legs that long!” the rest of the girls jeered.
The apparent chumminess of the girls was only surface level after all. Does the World of Boobs really exist in this forest? Should I set my hopes on it?
We ate dinner, everyone took a bath, and then we commenced the council of twenty girls and one loner.
The Class Rep briefed us on the plan. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll follow the stream downriver. If we haven’t found a way out of the forest by the afternoon, we’ll come back, okay?”
“Sure,” I said. “Who knows if we’ll actually find anything. If we do find a road, town, or anything like that, then we can keep going.”
“Let’s make sure our preparations are perfect,” said the Class Rep. “Anything extra can fit into Haruka-kun’s Bag of Holding.”
“Got it!” the girls shouted. Huh, they’re getting along fine, now.
The girls gathered all their stuff into Villager A’s magical tent. I was fine making camp with a normal tent. We had plenty of dried fish and even more mushrooms. *Twenty-one people could survive being stranded on a desert island for months with all these supplies.* The sheer volume of mushrooms strained the limits of even what a magical Bag of Holding could handle.
I suspected that the moment we left this forest, it would revert to an undifferentiated landscape of mushrooms and goblins.

DAY 15
NIGHT
♦
IN FRONT OF THE CAVE
THE TENT

I WOKE UP in the middle of the night and decided to clear my head by taking a walk in the woods. I couldn't step into the cave, after all. *The girls would totally call the cops on me if they caught me creeping around at night.*
I chanced upon the meathead jocks.
"Oh, hey there," I said.
"Haruka!" one said. "We froze when we heard someone coming. Who knows what's out here when it's this dark?"
"So, why were you trying to follow me? Oh wait, it's because you're all idiots."
"Hey, shut your damn mouth! We're not idiots!"
Ugh. Loud, irritable, and rude!
"Guys, do you know how suspicious it looks to find you creeping around, stalking a bunch of high school girls in the middle of the night? Only idiots would get caught red-handed like that. Therefore, without a doubt, you're idiots."
"We weren't stalking the girls! We're here for you!"
I shrugged in surprise. "Didn't know you guys swung that way."
"Whoa, we're not gay! We—we don't even like BL!"
Loud, irritable, rude, and with a mind in the gutter!
"Well, why exactly are you hiding from the girls?"
"Can't trust 'em."
"You can't *trust* them? You guys left the nerds to their fate and did nothing when the other guys attacked the girls! Pretty inexcusable to bring up trust, know what I mean?"
"You're right. I just…I just don't trust 'em."
The meatheads looked like they were struggling to express their thoughts. Normally, idiots had no filter between brain and mouth, but it looked like they were trying to *think*. *I wish they'd just* leave *instead.*
"What idiotic rationale could you possibly have to distrust them? Just for the sake of pure idiot clarity, can you answer?"
"Pure idiot clarity? Bro, didn't you hear about how Katsuyama and his friends used Puppetry and Mesmerize?"
"Yeah, I heard. The nerds told me."
The meathead knit his brows in thought. Wait, "in thought?" Since when could those words describe this meathead? Did this world transform him?
"We couldn't trust anyone after that."

“That makes no sense,” I said. “The nerds and the other girls aren’t like those garbage delinquents.”
“You still don’t get it?!”
“I might just not be stupid enough to see what’s so obvious to you. I’m trying, though. If I can figure out what you guys are talking about, I might be able to understand creatures as stupid as goblins. Actually, have you tried talking with the goblins? You’re on about the same intellectual level, so you should get along just dandy.”
“Shut the hell up! You’re always such a dick!”
I was shocked. The jocks weren’t totally witless after all. Could they have a legitimate concern?
“You’re worried about Hijack, right?” I asked.
“Yeah, bro! Everyone was making a huge fuss about Puppetry and Mesmerize, but no one said nothing about Hijack! The Class Rep and the nerds warned us that we should hide our skills. So, I was thinking—who’s got Hijack?”
“How stupid can you get? Even after all their advice, you still let your guard down around me. What if I have Hijack? Too late for you to hide now, isn’t it?!”
“If you have it, then so be it. We won’t tell anyone. So, do you?”
“No, but I do have Servitude. Doesn’t that freak you guys out?”
If I wanted to control these jocks, Servitude was a way better choice than Puppetry. Jocks were just another species of monster, like mean girls or goblins, and Servitude’s intended use was on monsters.
“That’s definitely worse, bro!”
It seemed like they instinctively sensed the danger of that skill. I was confident that jocks were some sort of goblin.
“Look, it doesn’t matter,” one of them said. “Whether it’s Hijack, Puppetry, Mesmerize, or Servitude, it’s no big deal if you got those skills. You’re kind of an asshole, bro, but we trust you. We’ve got your back!”
The conversation was going on for a while, so I invited them into the tent and gave them some food. Jeez, those guys could eat. I was happy to get rid of some mushrooms.
“I have no idea why you think you can only trust me, but if you do, then don’t worry. Everything’s fine.”
They nodded. “Good.”
“Is that all? You don’t need any convincing? No explanations?”
“We never needed the coach to explain why he picked a certain play, and we didn’t get it even if he did. So yeah, we trust you, dude. No need to explain things.”
These guys were okay. Well, at least they thought I was okay, which was enough for now. But they for sure had some screws loose.
“Thanks for the grub, bro! Anyway, we’ve got to head back to our own camp now, and we’ll let the others know you’re fine. Can you do us a solid and

apologize to Oda’s crew and the Class Rep for us? We’ll listen to whatever you guys say from now on.”
They stuffed their backpacks full of mushrooms and left. *Is this really okay?*

DAY 16

Talking and understanding each other is truly a wonderful thing.

IN FRONT OF THE CAVE

WE ATE AN EARLY BREAKFAST, double-checked everyone's bags, and closed up the cave. I made a stone door with Earth Magic. It looked like the kind of door that the Cave King would come out of if there was a big banquet or something.

"All right," I said. "Shall we set off downriver? Are we off to find the town? Off to hunt some nerds?"

"We're not *hunting* them!"

With that, we started to march along the riverbank. As expected, there weren't any monsters near the river.

The Class Rep tugged at my shirt. "Haruka-kun, can I have a word with you?"

"Sure. Do you want to talk while I scout ahead?"

We went ahead, ready to intercept approaching monsters. I didn't skewer any of them, so I figured no one would get mad at me this time.

The Class Rep paused. "So…"

"Is it about the meatheads?"

"Uh, yeah. So, you met them, right?"

"Oh right, I forgot to mention. They said they're sorry."

"Huh? They apologized?" She looked flustered. "Look, um, I'm…so sorry." She bowed forcefully. If she had been any closer she would've knocked me over with her head.

"I've wanted to tell you for a while…but I couldn't bring myself to do it. My skill…"

"Hey, don't worry about it!" I interrupted. "I know what it is."

Her jaw dropped. Um, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? Why so surprised?

"W-wait a second. Since when? How do you know?"

"Doesn't everyone know? Well, maybe not the meatheads or the goblins. They're too stupid to figure it out."

Well, to be precise, the goblins might know but no one's asked. I guess I'll keep it a secret for now.

"If it was a secret, you should've said so," I said. "We'd all be in trouble if I accidentally talked about something that's supposed to be a secret! Oh, but I didn't tell the meatheads, I promise—"

"But how did you know?! Nerd A promised me that he wouldn't tell anyone!"

Hijack—the skill that let someone steal skills from others. It was probably the strongest, most dangerous skill in the world. If you had it, it was an unbeatable cheat code—and if you didn't, it was an unstoppable menace.

Someone with Hijack could steal any skills just by being near their target. The skill-thief would get more dangerous with every skill they stole. And in typical light novels and games, a skill like Hijack only worked if the target was killed.
Someone targeted by Hijack didn't just risk losing their skill, they risked losing their life. The existence of that skill threatened to turn any interaction into a kill-or-be-killed survival game.
It was a taboo skill. You couldn't tell anyone you had it, and if you did, they'd avoid you like the plague. Or maybe try to kill you.
"If you knew that I had this skill, why did you rescue me? Aren't you worried? You should want to avoid me, despise me, or abandon me. I mean…I steal other people's skills…"
"Huh? Why? Were the nerds scared of you? Why would I be scared?"
"B-but, I might steal your skills at any moment."
"Why would I worry about that?"
"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry." The Class Rep looked away, down at the ground.
In what world would anyone try to steal Loner, NEET, Shut-In, Blockhead, Master of None, or Corporate Proactiveness? *If you want them, they're all yours!*
If she did use Hijack on me, she'd only screw herself over.
Class Rep bit her lip. "Look, I feel terrible about having this skill. But…what happens if the others find out?"
"The nerds weren't scared of you, right? That's what I'm saying!"
Why is she so upset? I thought. What's the issue?
"What are you talking about?"
"Don't you get it? Everyone is relieved that *you're* the one who has that skill!"
"Huh?!"
"Everyone was freaking out over who had Puppetry, Mesmerize, and Hijack! After Puppetry and Mesmerize were sealed, everyone was relieved. But no one's worried about sealing Hijack, right?"
"What are you saying?"
"Even the idiot meatheads were afraid of those skills; you think the others weren't, too? But everybody thinks there's no problem anymore, so there's no problem. I figured it out without the nerds telling me, so everyone else has probably figured it out, too. No one's panicking, right? So, what's the problem?"
I knew all along that the nerds didn't have Hijack. They were surrounded by goblins when I ran into them, which meant that they didn't have Presence Detection. Goblins had that skill, so someone with Hijack would have naturally stolen it from them. That was proof enough that the nerds didn't have it.
More importantly, the nerds weren't worried about it, even though they knew all about how dangerous it was. If they were concerned, they would have tried to figure out who got Hijack, or at least warned me about it.

Yet, the nerds, who had been outrageously mistreated back in school, trusted whoever had Hijack—which guaranteed that there was *definitely* nothing to worry about!
That was a lifetime warranty for total peace of mind. Not just issued by anyone—that was a Nerd-Approved Warranty. Stricter standards simply did not exist.
“Class Rep, have you been crying a lot lately?”
“Crying? That’s because of you!”
“I’m innocent! I didn’t do anything!”
“That’s not true. You’ve done so much. Thank you…”
Were we speaking the same language here? I made her cry and she’s thankful? What did I do?
Let’s see…I haven’t tried to hook up with her or anything. I didn’t have the guts to pull anything like that, but if I did, I’d totally deserve a title like Hero for my recklessness. I couldn’t imagine what would happen to me if I did, though. *Terrifying high school girl boss rush? I’d surrender before the fighting even starts!*
“B-but how did you convince those guys that everything was okay without revealing my secret?”
“The idiots? I just told them that things are fine and they were like, ‘cool story bro!’ They’re total idiots, y’know?”
“What do you mean, ‘fine’?!”
“Well, it’s not like I could’ve convinced them with logic…you know, because they’re morons?”
“That doesn’t explain anything! You’re acting like they’re completely brainless! You can be so casually cruel sometimes. This is important, so please take it seriously!”
It looked like Class Rep had finally reached her wit’s end.
“You told me to stop calling the nerds ‘nerds,’ but you just called one of them ‘Nerd A’ a minute ago,” I said.
“I did?! Agh, please forgive me, Oda-kun, I’ve been brainwashed!”
Hey, I deny all accusations of brainwashing! If I had that skill I’d be doing a hell of a lot better.
“In order to use Hijack, I need to kill the target,” the Class Rep said. “*Oda-kun* warned me not to let anyone know about my skills.”
“I get it, so you’ve been taking skills from the goblins and orcs we’d fought this whole time.” I nodded. *All the loose ends are tied up.*
“Wait a second,” I gasped, “does that mean you got Super Horny and Alpha Male?”
“Gaaaah! You can be such a jerk!”
In the middle of a primeval forest, Class Rep wailed inconsolably. *Did she just break? Where’s the reset button?* The other girls stormed out, stood behind her, and volleyed insults and accusations at me. *I didn’t do anything! I swear!*

The girls got their fill of bullying when the sun reached its apex. *Wait a minute, it's lunch time!* Another fish and mushroom barbecue! I put the fish and mushrooms on skewers and roasted them. Every time I looked in the Class Rep's direction, she just stared back at me with furious, half-lidded eyes.

I flipped the skewers over and roasted them over an open flame. The fiery glare of the Class Rep made me feel like I was the one being roasted.

I set a few skewers before her. She glared without pause.

This isn't a Glare of Eternal Friendship, is it?

"Class Rep, come on, time for lunch!"

She kept glaring at me. I had to say something to cheer her up.

"Uh, Class Rep. It's fine! There are worse skills out there. Like Molester—aah!"

Class Rep yanked the ground out from between us with Ground Shrink and slapped me. Ouch! *That's so unfair…*

What to do now? Setting the Class Rep's inexplicable mood aside, we still hadn't made it to the edge of the forest. Even using Clairvoyance, I saw nothing but trees in every direction. We were planning to head back in a few hours if we didn't find anything by then. If there were plains somewhere, we could've spotted towns or roads, but I couldn't sense anything like that. I glanced around, only to meet the Class Rep's judgmental gaze. We came to such a harmonious consensus about her Hijack ability, but merely mentioning Alpha Male and Super Horny made her turn on me! *To understand each other through discussion would be wonderful if it were possible,* I thought, rubbing my cheek. *She smacked me so hard that I'm certain she could defeat an orc by herself.*

"Hey Vice Rep A, should we get going?" I asked.

"Did you say Vice Rep A? That's not my name!"

"Uh, okay then. Vice Rep B, how about it?"

"Why would I answer to Vice Rep B?" She winked. "If you're trying to guess my size, you're way off."

No kidding, B is way too small! I suddenly felt a wave of bloodlust coming from the Class Rep. Her glare was veering toward murderous.

I wasn't looking! I wasn't even thinking about them! Not much, anyway!

We walked for about an hour without seeing any way out of the woods. If things kept going this poorly, we'd have to camp in the forest.

As it turned out, leaving the woods was more than a day trip. As far as I was concerned, setting up camp tonight would be just as easy as returning to the cave. *I guess we'll decide by vote.* Unfortunately, we couldn't hold a vote because we couldn't start a meeting. And we couldn't start a meeting because the Class Rep refused to do anything but glare at me! *I demand my right to vote. Just give me my fundamental human rights!*

Eventually, an informal vote was taken, and most people voted to head back to the cave.

We trudged back the way we came. We considered leveling up on the way back, but that would have meant we probably wouldn't reach the cave until late at night. There was a pretty big difference between deciding to camp in the woods ahead of time and being forced to make camp at the last minute. I know that the person still glaring at me felt the same way. *What's wrong with her?*

When we made it back, I pulled the stone door open, hiding my frustration. I had worked so hard on this door, hoping that I wouldn't have to use it so soon. Now, what to do for dinner? A home-cooked meal seemed best, so I got started on herb-stuffed grilled fish. I also filled up the bath. This would be everyone's last chance to bathe in comfort before we set out tomorrow.

I used my Map skill and confirmed that the river wound a long, snaking path to the right. Cutting across the deep forest would potentially shorten our trip, but fighting all the tougher monsters would probably cost us more time than we'd save.

I was concerned that we couldn't have a strategy meeting. I was way too scared to ask anyone to attend, which was a bit of a problem. Of course, the biggest problem was that our leader refused to say anything!

I escaped to my tent and decided to take a stroll through the forest. There weren't any more meatheads, but there were plenty of normal goblins. I was beyond exhausted. Still, I fought and killed a horde of goblins. The slaughter was punctuated by goblin battle cries cut short by the thwacking of a staff. I worked through all my stress by massacring those goblins, and now, beauteous sleep was calling me…but I sensed someone's presence in my tent.

"I can sense a presence in my tent," I called out. "It's not idiots this time. I'm gonna guess…somebody with angry eyes?"

"Guilty as charged," the Class Rep answered. "Sorry about today. I was just embarrassed."

Class Rep, aka Miss Glare, bowed in apology. Targeting my weakness! I can't help but forgive her when she leans forward and I get an eyeful like that.

"Um, yeah. Keep working…hard?" I tried to encourage her.

"You're not great at cheering people up." She straightened back up. "Are you upset?"

"I'm kidding." I paused. "Uh, so did you guys decide what you want to do?"

"Yeah, we're planning on exploring for at least three days."

I nodded. "You want to find the nerds, after all."

"Yeah, the n—Oda-kun and his friends."

Impressive. She stopped herself just in time.

"I figure you've gotta make sure the mean girls follow through," I said. They had improved so much as people, but their quest wasn't over until they found the nerds.

In battle, the mean girls had stayed on the front lines, a vanguard and shield for the others. Even though everyone had already forgiven them and

recognized their contributions, it seemed like they hadn’t yet forgiven themselves. They had become much stronger, but they were still putting themselves in danger with every battle.

That’s why I felt like I had to help them find the nerds. Whether or not the nerds forgave them, nothing would be settled until they at least said their piece. They couldn’t move on until they finished their quest.

The Class Rep nodded. “Well, we’re not forcing Shimazaki-san and her friends to do anything. I want to apologize alongside them. And to say thanks, too.”

Uh, who’s Shimazaki-san? Someone in town? But Miss Glare was glaring at me before I could ask.

DAY 17
MORNING
The day has come when humanity has learned what it's like to be a high-speed missile.
IN FRONT OF THE CAVE

WE ATE LUNCH and finished preparing for the expedition.
"We're going to take the shortcut through the forest," I told them. "Make sure everyone's armed, okay?"
"Got it!"
Everyone was unusually chipper. Did some strange mushrooms get in their breakfast? *Gotta stick to fish—there's no such thing as a psychedelic trout.*
They were all showing each other their stomachs and chattering about how slim and toned they'd gotten. *Could they please be a little more aware that a teenage boy is among them?*
As we began to travel, we encountered only goblins and kobolds, no orcs. Nonetheless, the girls kept leveling up tirelessly as we hiked. *Maybe their stamina's improved,* I thought.
We made great time. It wasn't even noon when we passed the point where we'd turned around yesterday. We didn't stop for lunch, opting to eat dried mushrooms as we walked instead—it was a terrible lunch, but we had a long way to go. *Did the nerds find the town safely? If they stopped somewhere along the way and were living in the woods, the mean girls would hunt them down soon at this rate.*
I used Appraisal to look around for food, but I only found medicinal herbs effective against poison. Was that foreshadowing? I gathered some just in case. It was strange that there were so many antidote herbs but nothing poisonous. *If it's not a sign, then I'm just weeding the forest like a garden.*
I checked around with Clairvoyance, but all I could sense was more forest, more herbs, and more kobolds. Everyone was getting sick of walking.
"Let's take a break," I called. "I've got juice. Low, low price!"
"Give me some juice, mister," said Nudist Girl. "I don't have money, but I can pay with my body!"
She gave me a lascivious wink and laughed.
"Uh, just take it for free, okay?"
Nudist girl slumped forward, dismayed. "I see, my body's…not even worth… one cup of juice…"
Despondent, she started tracing shapes on the ground. Oh, it's been a while! Let me join in and I'll show off my drill technique!
"Haruka-kun, lay off Fukunuki-san," called the Class Rep. "She's starting to, uh, lose things."

Why does everything I say end with them mad at me? Besides, who the hell is Fukunuki-san? I was just giving out juice! This was bordering on psychological abuse!

"I know we've already come pretty far, but we want our camp to be secure," I told the Class Rep. "It's a ways away, but there's a good spot by the river." It was at the limit of what I could sense with Clairvoyance, but if monsters stayed away from the riverbank then it would at least be safe. I considered scouting ahead to check it out. I had some things I wanted to test out, too. "The woods are fine now, right? Do you think it's a good plan for me to check out that area?"

"I think that's a good call, but phrasing everything as a question makes me second-guess how good of an idea it really is," the Class Rep said. "Should I come along?"

"No, I'd rather you stay here. I'm just going to go there and back. I'll be fine on my own."

I went ahead and started to run through the woods. Using Magic Infusion, I strengthened my body like I had a while back. Then I used Weight Magic to make my body even lighter. *Whoa!* I was going faster than ever. The lighter I became, the faster I ran.

I made it to the river and turned downstream. I couldn't move this fast anywhere in the forest but the riverbank; dodging trees at this speed would be impossible. They whipped by me like projectiles in a video game.

There weren't many obstacles along the river. The footing was poor, but since my body was so light, I kept leaping in huge bounds. *Could I even fly?* If I gave myself a big head start and then jumped, I just might manage it, but I needed a straight runway to gather enough speed. *There we go—the river straightens out a bit here. Let's do it!*

"I can fly!" I cried, running as fast as I could and then leaping off the ground. "I…can…flyyyyyyy!"

I flew. Maybe it was more like a high-speed, long-distance, aerial power walk? One small step for a man, one high-velocity surface-to-air missile leap for mankind. This experience is even more unusual than getting summoned to another world.

The river and forest shrunk into the distance below me. *There it is!* I could see the way out of the woods—it was too far to see with Clairvoyance from the ground. Then the wind resistance caught up to me while I was busy taking it all in, and I stalled out. Buffeted by the winds, I plummeted like a stone. *Is this the end?*

I screamed as I fell. The trees in my way broke with a series of deafening cracks. Then, with a *ba-sklorsh*, I rocketed straight into the ground. *I lost half my HP!* Apparently the sky was more hazardous than most monsters. Distracted fly-jumping could be fatal. And what was that sound at the end? Was the ground mocking me?

I was back in the middle of the forest. *Everything hurts, but that was awesome!* Good thing I'd used Magic Infusion to strengthen my body. Weight Magic probably helped soften the impact, too.
From above, I had seen everything clearly. The river made a sharp bend to the right up ahead, so if we cut through the forest to the right at an angle, we would save some time. *Now to report back.*
"I'm back," I called. "I think we can make it out of the woods by night?"
"Huh? You scouted ahead that far?" asked Class Rep.
"Er, not exactly. I kind of launched into the sky and saw the way out while I was falling back down?"
"Haruka-kun, I don't think your Corporate Proactiveness is working properly. Your scouting report leaves a ton of questions unanswered! How did you get launched into the sky? Did you get a skill that turns you into a satellite or something?! How did you get so injured?!"
Well, I was unemployed, wasn't I? How was I supposed to learn how to make accurate, informative reports?
"What guy wouldn't want to fly like a superhero?" I said. "We're in a world of magic, so I figured I might as well give it a shot. So I shot myself into the sky, but after a while I crashed into the ground. Turns out, falling from a great height hurts."
The Class Rep glared at me again, but I wouldn't let that get me down. I realized that my cloak and tunic didn't have a scratch on them. Even kobold's claws didn't rip them. Plus, no matter how dirty and blood-soaked they got, rinsing them with water made them good as new. *What the hell kind of work did Villager A do to need stuff like this?*
We took the aforementioned shortcut through the woods to the right. This was saving us a lot of time, but we kept on guard in case of monsters. Whenever we came across monsters, a party of five girls stepped up, killed them, and then switched out for the next team of five. It was fast and efficient. *Just as I thought, the Class Rep is great at strategy, leadership, and analysis.* Were Super Horny and Alpha Male making her even more effective? *Uh, I'm not thinking about anything, Class Rep, just thinking about the weather! She can definitely read my thoughts!*
The sky grew dark. The trees had become sparser as we neared the edge of the forest. It was probably a good idea to set up camp here, where there was still cover.
"Hey, does anyone think it's a good idea to stop for camp here?"
"Yes, *please*!" the girls shouted in unison.
Everyone seemed spent.
I noticed that everyone was staring as I set up the giant air-dome tent—was there something wrong with that? Every time I did anything, they all seemed to find something to take issue with!
"We're not mad, we're all baffled that you just said 'open' and the tent opened up like that. It's more than enough space for twenty people!"

I diverted a part of the river into an earthen basin to make a simple open-air bath with a screen to separate bathing areas, heated up the water, and fled the scene as fast as I could. Nudist Girl had started stripping down while I was still building the bath, and I figured they'd all scold me even if she was the exhibitionist. Maybe I had a new title, Pariah? Since I hadn't been able to find anything besides bitter, antidotal herbs, I had to put up with a smorgasbord of mushroom salads seasoned with salt for dinner.

The girls took baths, ate, and rolled around in the tent like usual. Class Rep looked too exhausted to tell them to knock it off. I sat down and pretended to nap so that no one would hassle me. Then I surreptitiously channeled my magic to build a fence and moat around the campsite. That's what the nerds did at the old base. *Now what else could I make? Of course!* I dotted the surroundings with pit traps using Earth Magic. *Can I make magical traps?*

I realized that we didn't need a night watch. The tent was monster repellant, and Enemy Tracking and Presence Detection worked even in my sleep.

Still, the girls needed to be ready for when they'd be on their own, so they kept watch in shifts. *Wait, did someone assign me to a shift with others by mistake?*

All that aside, the night was cool and pleasant, my sleeping bag was comfortable, and I felt protected by my Shut-In title. It drizzled a few times that night, but the rain was so light it was barely noticeable. Maybe the dry season had started?

I needed to get some sleep before my shift. As I drifted off, I wondered how the others knew when their shift was over.

"Haruka-kun, wake up, it's time for your shift," someone called.

"Ugh, wake me up when I'm dead," I muttered.

"I'm not letting you sleep until then! Is this world not good enough for you?"

Grumbling to myself, I followed the girl from the gymnastics team out of the tent, where four jock girls had assembled. *Damn, am I the weakest one here? No, it was definitely Nudist Girl.*

"Good morning!" one of them said. "Let's crush this night shift!"

"Aren't we just staying awake and keeping an eye out?"

"Don't fall asleep," Nudist Girl said. "If you do, I'll fall asleep, too. We'll end up sleeping together!"

"What are you talking about? Just don't sleep! Definitely don't sleep together!"

Some of the sporty girls at our school were pretty famous, even getting mentions on TV and in the newspaper. *Maybe that means they have names,* I thought. *Not that I have any idea what they are.*

Thinking back on it, Nudist Girl must've caused all sorts of problem back in the real world, even just around other girls. She was a candidate for the Olympic swim team. The sleepy-looking gymnastics girl must have been a troublemaker as well. Both of them apparently participated in huge

international competitions. And the other two were popular girls who won regional high school championships when they were first-years.
“Okay, it’s on the tip of my tongue,” I said. “Are you guys called…the twin telephone poles?”
I remembered a banner someone put up back in high school. I thought I remembered… *Come on, brain cells, remember!*
“Who are you calling telephone poles?!” they yelled at me. “Are you saying our legs are fat? Or do you not remember *our names*?!”
“Hang on, hang on,” I said. “Wasn’t there a big banner that called you two the twin telephone poles?”
“The twin *towers*! No one has ever called us telephone poles!”
“I’d burn any sign that called me a telephone pole! No question!”
I remembered wrong? I guess my brain cells aren’t up to the task.
“I can’t believe I’m on night watch with so many superstars,” I said. “I guess I’m nervous?”
“How can you call us superstars if you don’t even know our names? *We’re in the same class!*”
“And I’m just…Nudist Girl…Nudist…Girl…”
Looked like something had really hurt Nudist Girl’s feelings. Was she still traumatized from getting attacked by the guys?
“No, let me finish!” I exclaimed. “Nudist Girl, you saw them on TV, right? And you—you were the, the Marmalade Pretzel of competitive swimming?”
“Marmalade…pretzel? I love…pretzels…”
Oh no. She’s getting worse! Maybe she was traumatized by fighting monsters every day?
“Uh, how the hell did you turn Mermaid Princess into Marmalade Pretzel?!”
I was sure it was Marmalade Pretzel. Whoever told me about her must’ve misheard.
“He’ll definitely butcher my nickname, too,” said the gymnastics girl.
“Oh no, you’re good,” I said. “You had flyers all over the halls. The Febreze Dance? Yeah, I saw it every morning.”
“Why would the gymnastics team advertise air fresheners in a school?!”
“It was *Fairy Dance*! Did you think we got on stage and sprayed aerosols the whole time?”
A few of the girls in the tent yelled at us to be quiet since they were trying to sleep. *Why did everyone only get mad at me? Is this the true nature of high school girls revealed?* I didn’t like it one bit.
I built a bonfire, and we checked the surrounding area. Nothing showed up with Enemy Tracking and Presence Detection. The Four Sports Queens took offense at my initiative. Jocks were jocks regardless of gender. All those muscles squeezed out any room for brains.
“Want some juice?” I suggested.
“Woo-hoo! Juice!”
They really were the intellectual equals of goblins.

“Didn’t you say there weren’t many berries around to make juice with? Are you sure we can have some?”
“Oh, well, I get a strong flavor from just steeping the fruit in water,” I said. “No matter how many times I re-steep the same fruit, it still turns into juice. I guess it’s some sort of mystery potion?”
“All-you-can-drink juice! I can’t believe we can get unlimited refills here!”
“When I leave, I’ll give each group one fruit so you can have some,” I said.
“Are you really going to leave?”
I knew it was most logical to leave, but emotionally, I was torn. I knew that a few of the girls still didn’t want me to be there.
The sports girls should know. They would understand better than anyone.
“When you’re playing at a championship match, do you really take the weakest member of your team off the bench?” I said. “Wouldn’t that just make everyone miserable?”
These girls, who had reached the peak of their respective sports, would know just what was best for a team. They really understood what a difference in level meant in the real world.
Eventually our shift ended and we swapped with the group of vice class reps. *Which one of them is the* real *vice rep?* I wondered.

DAY 17
LATE AT NIGHT
♦
CAMPSITE
INSIDE THE TENT
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

IT WAS OUR TURN to take watch, and the sports team reported back to us.
Assigning Haruka-kun to their team without asking him was a little unfair, but I wanted to split everyone up evenly.
"We couldn't convince him to stay," they told me. "In fact, he convinced us."
"When he explained himself, we didn't know what to say."
"It just makes more sense for him to strike out on his own."
"I couldn't say anything…" said Fukunuki-san. "I wanted to say so much…"
Even the sports team couldn't persuade him. They were supposed to express their gratitude, but it backfired. He was like a centrifuge, taking in whatever anyone said and spitting out high-speed, irritating nonsense. Before anyone even got a chance to thank him, they couldn't help yelling at him instead!
"I think we'll have to consult with Oda-kun and the others when we find the town," I said.
Haruka-kun was so hard to convince; he wouldn't even let us express our thanks. Everyone was so thankful for what he'd done, but he was so unbelievably shy.

DAY 18
MORNING
Why couldn't he understand? There must be a language barrier here.
THE CAMPSITE
IN FRONT OF THE TENT

UNFORTUNATELY, I hadn't acquired either Flight or Missile Launch skills. On the upside, I didn't get Stall or Crash Landing.

Everyone dithered in the morning, going to the river to rinse their faces when they finally got out of bed. We had fish for breakfast. I savored it while I still had the chance. I didn't want to leave the river and go back to eating nothing but mushrooms.

We finally made it out of the forest. Everyone was thrilled to get this far. We could scout easier out here, but all the hills still made it difficult to spot things in the distance. The hills blocked Clairvoyance, too.

Should I send myself flying again? It was pretty fun, after all, even if I couldn't really call it flying if I plummeted to the ground at the end. If only I could find a way of not falling down. Even if I didn't stall out on my first flight, I still would've crash landed in the end. But I wanted to learn to *fly*, not land!

Even in a thousand years, human beings would never be able to fly. Fantasy worlds should let us break those rules!

Okay, there had to be a way to pull off a safe landing. Learning an actual flight skill would've been great, but even that probably wouldn't let me land safely. I considered my options while reviewing my stats.

Walking, Movement, and Weight magic helped me take off, and I used Packing and Magic Infusion to land. Flight was a type of movement, so Movement might give my flying a boost—maybe I needed to keep using Movement Magic after I took off? I could soften my landing with Wind Magic, and then I should be able to keep my landing stable?

Now that I thought of it, what about using Wind Magic while in midair? *Now that was flight!*

"Hey! Hellooo. Haruka-kun, listen to me!"

Huh? Am I already flying? Could those be the dulcet tones of the Galactic Fairy?

"Did you even hear a word I said?"

Whoa, she startled the crap out of me! The Class Rep sounded just like Sheryl Nome from Macross Frontier!

"Don't you hear the strange sounds over there?" she continued. "Can you check it out with Clairvoyance…like I've been asking this entire time?"

“Sure, just a second. Whoa, I think some people are being attacked by monsters! A bunch of old men in armor, archers, and magic users. Six humans total!”
“Do you think they’ll be fine?” she said. “Are they winning?” The Class Rep was visibly worried about the old men. I regarded them with trepidation. Just because they were being attacked by monsters didn’t mean they were necessarily friendly.
If they were thieves, they might turn around and rob us after we saved them. I was worried about the girls. Despite the dangers, they kicked the delinquents out instead of killing them. Naturally, those delinquents retaliated and chased the nerds off. The Class Rep and her friends were too quick to forgive villains.
That was the main reason I was accompanying them to town: humans are more dangerous than monsters.
“Haruka-kun and anyone fast, let’s go help them!”
“We won’t make it in time from here. Besides, what will we do if they’re bandits or thieves?”
From what I could see, there was an armored old man, a sword user, a spear user, a long-haired archer taking cover behind a carriage, a hooded mage, and one other. They looked respectable on the surface, but who could say what they were really like? *In fact, we shouldn’t trust them precisely because they looked too trustworthy.* There was no reason to help them.
The monsters attacking them resembled wolves or dogs—they weren’t dog-headed humanoids like the kobolds but creatures we hadn’t seen before. There were thirty of the beasts, and they moved like they were using Pack Tactics. If the men dropped their guards for a moment, they’d be torn to shreds. Even if our fastest members charged straight into battle, the humans were still brutally outnumbered.
“If they try to hurt any of us, I’ll take them out myself,” the Class Rep said. “But we don’t know that they’re evil, so I still want to help them. We can’t do it by ourselves, so please help us!”
I figured she’d say that. Heading to town would be pointless if she couldn’t trust anyone she met. That was why I wanted to avoid people altogether—I’d rather err on the side of trusting people less.
Her reasoning seemed a bit naive to me, but she was also resolved to do this. I didn’t know how things would turn out, but I figured we’d be fine as long as we learned from any mistakes we made. *That’s why I’m here, after all.*
“Fine, I’ll help, too,” I said. “Just be on guard at all times.”
“Of course. We’ll stay safe!”
There was no way I could make it in time if I ran normally. Honestly, it was a toss-up whether I’d reach them even if I used my quartet of Movement, Walking, Magic Infusion, and Weight magic.
As I ran, I used Magic Infusion to strengthen my body and Weight Magic to lighten myself. I applied Movement and Wind magic and aimed at the sky.

Yesterday this felt like shooting myself into the sky, but it was really more like running through the air.
It all happened in a flash. The scene that I had been watching with Clairvoyance appeared faster than I could blink. *Oh crap, I can't stop!* I slowed myself by crashing through a dozen wolves, sending them flying, getting tangled up, tumbling, smashing into wolf after wolf and scattering them wildly. *Why haven't I figured out how to actually stop safely?*
"You folks okay?" I called.
"Are—are *you* okay?!" they cried.
They seemed to be unhurt. The wolves weren't so lucky, though—over half were out of commission.
An unfortunate traffic accident, I thought.
I hadn't been able to see the attack from where I started, yet I covered the distance there instantly. My speed must've been in the thousands of meters per second—making a conservative estimate, I'd covered around five miles in ten seconds. That meant I flew faster than two thousand miles per hour—way beyond the speed of sound. Shouldn't I have made a sonic boom?
No wonder the wolves died when I collided with them. The ones I directly ran into blew up like gory fireworks. This caused a chain reaction, as their flailing body parts still had enough momentum to kill yet other wolves. Though those other wolves also burst, their bodies didn't quite kill the few wolves remaining. Maybe I did cause a sonic boom? A cloud of dust billowed out around me.
I blew it away with Wind Magic and walked over to the old guys.
"Are you folks injured? Need a potion? It's mushroom-flavored, unfortunately."
They appeared unhurt. I lost more health than any of them… That's what I got for causing such a gruesome pileup.
I took a reluctant swig of the mushroom potion myself. *Disgusting.*
The old man with a sword was the first to speak.
"Please, allow us to give our thanks. You saved us. We were on the verge of destruction. My name is Ofter, and I'm the leader of this party. Thank you for saving me and my comrades."
"Thanks a bunch, kiddo," the fighter with a spear said. "I thought that was curtains for us. You're headed to Omui City, ain'tcha? I can thank you all proper-like once you get there. Name's Gatek. I'll buy you a pint in town."
The men bowed and thanked me. They were all armored, and three of the rear guard were behind the carriage, healing. The two men who had come to greet me went to check on them.
So there really is a town. Ennui City? Whatever the name was, these folks must've come from there. I lacked the conversational skills to gather any more intel from them, so I just kept my mouth shut. The girls were probably much more capable of gathering useful info.
Speaking of which, they were running toward us, but they were still a long way off. *Hang on…even without Clairvoyance…I can still see them*

bouncing?! The Class Rep can glare at me from this distance, too! The warriors called me over to continue the conversation.
Apart from the two old guys, the rest were young women. One of them looked like a European supermodel even in full plate armor. When the archer turned around, I realized she was an elf.
“The Adventurers’ Guild put up a bounty for the Greenwolf Clan, since they’d been attacking traveling merchants. The official listing said there were only six to eight beasts, not more than thirty. We would’ve definitely been killed.”
“One of them was a Dire Greenwolf, too. Look, the first one that burst.”
“A Dire Greenwolf? The hell was the guild thinking?!”
The spearman was incensed. That made sense; the guild’s bad information had almost gotten them killed.
Their carriage was broken, its wheels torn from their axles. Their horse was dead. We righted the carriage, but it had to be abandoned in the end.
“We’d planned to use that carriage as a barrier, but we didn’t imagine that we would cross paths with a Dire Greenwolf! Damn that beast!” the swordsman said.
The brusque warrior, What’s-His-Name, said, “Damn, it’s a total mess. Ain’t no way I can pay off my bar tab after today!”
In the end, the six divided up the carriage’s supplies to haul back to town. I didn’t want to reveal my Bag of Holding to strangers, so I simply watched in silence.
I was pretty bored, so I grilled some stamina mushroom skewers and handed them out. Even if they weren’t heavily injured, they had probably still taken some damage, and at the very least they were exhausted. They relished the mushrooms and eagerly shared their thoughts.
“Oh man, that’s the good stuff!”
Uh, are these mushrooms legal?
“Delicious! Stamina mushrooms, huh? Those are worth a pretty penny, y’know. Thanks for sharing ’em, kid!”
“Wait a second—it really is restoring my health! Wow, they really are HP mushrooms!”
“Stamina mushrooms?! Unbelievable! I feel better already. You already saved our lives, and now you’re feeding us—I don’t know what else to say. Thank you.”
I was surprised by all the fuss over the mushrooms. Were they really that valuable? The forest was overflowing with the things.
Seeing the young women relax and enjoy the food, I felt increasingly jealous of their male companions. *Just have to get rid of the guys! The women probably don’t like them anyw—*
“Haruka-kun! Wait a second! What are you doing?” cried the Class Rep. “You looked like you were about to attack! Why are you glaring at Ofter and Gatek?”

Why am I in trouble? I don't know an Ofter or a Gatek! Of course, the Queen of Glares knew why I was scowling immediately. I expected nothing less from someone with that title!
"Oh, you finally made it. Good hustle."
"No, we've been here for a little while now. We were just busy keeping watch."
Oh, that's right, she *was* keeping an eye on the group behind me. How did I forget? I felt waves of murderous intent emanate from her when one of the armored supermodels affectionately squeezed my hand in thanks. *Glaring at a stranger, the Class Rep was definitely looking out for me. Wait…did she stare daggers at me by mistake? That's ridiculous, must be my imagination.*
Once the rest of the girls caught up, we resumed our journey. Before too long, the town lay before us, bordering the river exactly as the nerds predicted.
Omui City. *I'm never going to remember that name.* I'd probably forget it long before we got there.
I'd forgotten the names of the old guys almost immediately, so there was no point even trying on that front.
The armored girl's name was Akemi, but she told us her friends called her Kemi or Ami. She worked at a little pub in town. *I want to go! Do they let high schoolers into bars in a fantasy world?*
The elf was known as Kirikiru. When the girls saw her, they babbled excitedly: "Oh my god, she's *so* beautiful! She's a real elf! A living work of art!"
Akemi was pretty popular among the girls, too. Vice Rep C said to her, "Oh! So dashing…please shake my hand!" What was it about that aloof, androgynous style that got some girls so excited?
The other two women were Iyebgyiek the Mage and Guventié the Bishop. They were both more cute than beautiful, but I was too anxious to talk to them at all. *They're way out of my league even if I could remember those names, let alone pronounce them.* Even their own party members referred to them by the nicknames Eb and Ti.
The women mingled with the other girls as we walked. Meanwhile, I was stuck keeping the two old guys company. *Twenty-four beautiful girls and I'm stuck with two stinking geezers? How unfair is that?!*
Nonetheless, I tried to make conversation. "Your companions have some pretty unique names. They must be tough to remember, right?"
What is that sensation?
I felt the baleful gaze of twenty pairs of eyes stabbing into my back. When I turned around, the intensity of their contempt almost did me in.

DAY 18
AFTERNOON
♦
OMUI CITY

I'D NEVER BEEN outside of Japan before, so I couldn't say if this town had a European vibe.
Nor was I born in the middle ages, so I had no clue what medieval style really looked like.
Obviously, this was my first time in a fantasy world, so I didn't have the faintest idea what typical fantasy world buildings were like.
The buildings were mostly made of stone with no concern for architectural style, just walls made from interlocking stacks of field stones. I suspected there wasn't a building code requiring rustic facades to draw in more tourists, either. They were just built this way because it was easiest.
They weren't trying for a natural vibe, either. The only materials I saw were stone and wood. The town was almost entirely gray.
All of the people in the town resembled Westerners. The men had chiseled, defined features like Greek sculptures. *Too many handsome guys. If they don't mind being chiseled, maybe they won't mind getting a pummeling either?*
The women were beautiful, too. The children were cute, but the adults were downright gorgeous. This place was pretty incredible.
When the old guys led the way into town, it turned out there was an entry fee, but they accepted payment in spellstones. In fact, just one spellstone was enough to let all twenty-one of us in, with some change to spare.
My Bag of Holding was practically overflowing with spellstones, which up until now I'd had no idea what to do with. Spending one was no big deal. If only I could have paid in mushrooms—I had way more of those.
The Class Rep's plan was to go directly to the Adventurers' Guild, exchange for the local currency, register, and then stay at an inn. Meanwhile, we'd ask around about the nerds. If we found them, they could tell us everything they learned, too.
We all went to the Adventurers' Guild together. The old guys led the way, eager to kick the doors in and give the Guild a piece of their mind.
Meanwhile, the girl adventurers seamlessly blended in with the girls from my world.
I saw a hanging signboard painted yellow. "Wow, a real Adventurers' Guild!" exclaimed the girls. It looked like a typical stone building, just like every other building in this town.
The old guys couldn't wait to make their complaints to the guild. *Age turns people into total grumps.*

All eyes were on me as I entered the building. *Uh…am I popular now?*
My hopes were dashed when I realized it was just a bunch of men staring. *I'm just not into boys' love!* A lot of the staring faces didn't look so friendly, either. Were they clicking their tongues? It was an ugly atmosphere in an ugly room filled with ugly faces.
The meanest, baddest, most grizzled-looking bunch of lowlifes stood up and walked over to me, giving me a contemptuous look all the while. *Ugh, what a total cliché!*
Oh, is that it? They must've been upset that one guy had so many girls with him. Yeah, if I saw a guy with twenty girls, I wouldn't like him either. *I was pissed about two old guys traveling with four girls earlier!* Typical light novel scenario: a new guy walks into the guild with some cute girls, and he immediately gets attacked.
Even if there were only one or two girls, he'd attract unwanted attention.
Three or four were enough cause for a fight.
Five or six would cause an immediate brawl without any preamble.
Seven to nine girls and all hell would break loose. Even the Guild staff would take part.
More than ten would set the whole town against him. *Some crimes can't be forgiven!*
This time, there were twenty-four girls. That made me an enemy of the state —no, the world. It was kill-or-be-killed! *No choice, right?!*
"Hey, you! With the ugly look on your face!" one of them shouted at me.
"What did you just say?" I snapped. "You're one putrid, maggot-brained piece of stinking gutter trash with a face not even a goblin could love. Where do you get off insulting my face?!"
However gentle and upstanding I usually was, I could not abide getting called ugly by *this* guy. He was a grand champion of ugliness. One look from him was enough to turn milk sour.
"Call me ugly one more time, I dare—huh?"
Suddenly, all the putrid, maggot-brained pieces of stinking gutter trash with faces not even goblins could love knelt down on the ground, trembling.
After insulting me, they won't even fight? What the hell?
"Haruka-kun! Knock it off! You made everyone cry! Even the guild workers are shaking in fear! You shouldn't glare like that!"
Huh? Why shouldn't I glare? There's so much to glare about! What was with this loathsome tableau? All these tongue-clicking bastards were hiding underneath their tables. Was it an earthquake drill? Was my glare a natural disaster?
My contacts were supposed to improve my expression! Besides, they glared at me first! All I did was glare back, and now I'm the bad guy? What the hell?!
The Class Rep quarantined me away from everyone else. It was like there'd been a viral outbreak of bullying.

Now I was all alone in a shadowy corner of the guild. No adventurer dared look my way.
Everyone was sitting around circular tables scattered around the room. At every table, someone was facing my direction, but everyone avoided looking at me. Some of them had to turn their necks at uncomfortable angles to look elsewhere.
This town sucks, I thought. The nerds probably got bullied and kicked out again.
No one even glanced at me. The pretty receptionist, the horde of adventurers, the few beautiful female fighters, the beefy armored knights, the shady hooded sorcerers—not a single person dared look my way. *I'm so bored!* Finally, those old guys came back.
The spear guy looked around with a curious expression.
"Sorry for the wait. Uh, something happen here? Don't tell me, don't tell me. Did y'all try to start some beef with the guy who saved our hides?!"
The spear guy gave the other adventurers a mean look, but none of them were looking at me.
"Come on, buddy, why don'tcha tell me what's happening?" he asked me.
"Uh, well, everyone was harassing me the moment I walked in, right? Then the Class Rep scolded me. And now I'm sitting in a corner while everyone ignores me on purpose. It's totally bullying, isn't it?"
For some reason everyone in the guildhall shook their heads no. *How is this not bullying?*
The sword guy walked in.
"My sincerest apologies, but might I have a moment of your time? There were a few lingering questions regarding the encounter with the Greenwolves. Pardon, what's with everyone's expressions?"
"Uh, maybe they're trying to haze the newbie." I said. "Or they could be doing some sort of 'bully the outsider' routine, don't you think?"
Again, everyone in the guild shook their head no. *What the hell, this is definitely bullying!*
"Who cares about the Greenwolves, anyway? They got blown to bits. What else is there to say?"
"But *you* caused that devastation! In truth, the Greenwolves aren't what I'd like to discuss. If you have a moment to spare, please come with me."
"I don't know what you're trying to say, but my schedule's wide open, and I'm happy to answer any questions."
He led me to the stairs and up to the second floor. As I walked across the room, everyone kept their eyes averted. We came to a door on the second floor. The old man knocked.
"I brought him," the sword guy said.
A voice answered, "Come on in."
There was another geezer sitting in the room. The encounter rate for decrepit old men was way too high. Even though I brought twenty-four girls with me, I only ever got to talk to old men.

“I’m Hakiess, master of the Omui City Adventurers’ Guild. Sorry for any inconvenience.”
He bowed his head. Why was the guild master apologizing?
“Don’t worry about it. Did you want to ask me something?”
“I want to extend my thanks to you for saving Ofter and his party. The Guild was entirely at fault for giving the wrong information regarding the mission. That many Greenwolves would have wiped out a B-class party. I never would’ve imagined that another party of adventurers would happen along. You have my gratitude.”
“It was not only that he saved us. He managed to defeat a Dire Greenwolf single-handedly,” said sword guy.
“A Dire Greenwolf, you say? We need to prepare a seal immediately.”
“You misunderstand, sir, he *destroyed* it.”
“I don’t follow. He rescued all of you, so what was destroyed?”
“The Dire Greenwolf. He destroyed the Dire Greenwolf and all its kin as well.”
They seemed to be talking past each other. The swordsman’s way of talking didn’t help. Clearly they didn’t have Corporate Proactiveness.
I butted in, “Gramps here isn’t exaggerating, They were being attacked by a Dire Greenwolf and thirty-six Greenwolves. All of them died, get it?”
“I thought you saved the whole party!” shouted the guild master. “Who died?”
“The Dire Greenwolf and the other wolves—thirty-seven of them in total—met an unfortunate end.”
“An unfortunate end? How?”
“How should I put it? When I went to save this old dude here, I kind of… maybe bumped into them?”
“You bumped into Ofter?”
“No, you can plainly see the geezer’s still alive and kicking! Obviously, I didn’t blow him up.”
Why couldn’t he understand? There must be a language barrier here.
“Are you being serious? What are you trying to tell me?”
That moment, the elf and the Class Rep entered. Finally, it didn’t feel so much like a retirement home.
“Kirikiru, I’m glad you’re safe,” said the guild master. “I’m so sorry about what happened.”
“That’s not important right now. Haruka here defeated them—the Dire Greenwolf and all thirty-six of the regular wolves.”
“Huh? Do you mean to tell me that Haruka defeated them in battle?”
“Not quite, it was more like I crashed into them, blowing all the wolves up like fireworks filled with wolf guts. It went something like that, I think?”
There were tears in the elf’s eyes. “I can’t understand anything he says!”
That old guild master must have upset her somehow, I thought.
For some reason, the Class Rep pinched my ear and dragged me out of the room.

There I was, a loner sitting in the corner of the Adventurers’ Guild. I only answered the questions I was asked.

DAY 18
EVENING
♦
OMUI GUILD
INTERLUDE:
GUILD MASTER'S ROOM

FINALLY, I called Haruka-kun back to confirm the story.

"To be crystal clear, you defeated all the Greenwolves, including the Dire Greenwolf, correct?"

It was preposterous, but everyone's story was the same. Furthermore, Ofter never stretched the truth or told jokes about important matters.

"Can you explain how you defeated them alone?" I asked.

It shouldn't have been possible. Only S-rank adventurers could defeat that many beasts alone, seasoned warriors well over level 100. Haruka-kun was level 9, not even a high enough level to become an adventurer in the first place. He should have had difficulty fighting the weakest of monsters.

"It was really more like an accident. I crashed into them, and they all exploded. It was like a big highway collision, I guess? Yeah, it was that dangerous."

Nothing he said made an ounce of sense. But no one refuted it either, so it must have been the truth.

A big highway collision? Did that sort of thing happen often?

All I was certain of was that the pack led by the Dire Greenwolf had been eliminated, while Ofter's party was unharmed. Haruka had apparently rescued them. That was good enough for me—more than good enough.

I needed to get in touch with headquarters about these "highway collisions." I had never heard of them before.

DAY 18
NIGHT
♦
OMUI GUILD
INTERLUDE:
TRADE-IN COUNTER

THE BOY ASKED, “Can I, uh, trade in some F-class spellstones?”

Why was the kid phrasing that as a question? Oh, he’s that boy who intimidated everyone earlier. I had to be as polite as possible.

“You have F-class spellstones, I see. The payment depends on their size and purity, so we will appraise them and determine their value. Is that acceptable?”

“Okay? So where should I turn them in?”

“Uh…you can place them on this counter.”

Where else did he think they went? This was the trade-in counter, after all.

“But won’t they fall off?” he said.

“Ahem, please try placing them in the middle of the counter. They won’t fall off.”

“In the middle?” He looked confused but suddenly grinned. “Aha! You must have some sort of magical device set up to keep them from spilling over! Perfect!”

He flipped over his bag and out poured…oh my lord.

The counter was buried under a mountain of spellstones. I had to work overnight with twenty other guild employees to pick them all up. *That boy is the worst.*

DAY 18
NIGHT
♦
OMUI GUILD

THE CLASS REP and the girls all finished their Adventurer registrations while I exchanged the spellstones.

Apparently, the registration workers couldn't believe that a group of twenty level 30+ girls with overpowered skills all decided to register at once.

Meanwhile, I was always surrounded by old men.

At level 10, adventurers started training as apprentices. When they reached level 20, they officially earned the title of Adventurer and could join a party as a rookie. At level 30, they were finally allowed to be solo adventurers.

Which meant that at level 9 I couldn't even register. If I gained another level, I still wouldn't be able to officially join a party. At level 20, I'd be able to register as an Adventurer and sell my spellstones, but since my titles prevented me from forming parties, I wouldn't be able to take on any work. I'd need to get all the way to level 30 before I could work as an adventurer.

Since I wasn't an adventurer, I wasn't actually allowed to sell my spellstones. There was no point in even coming here. It's not like I wanted to get bullied, shunned, and surrounded by old geezers.

Fortunately, as a reward for saving the old guys, the Guild allowed me to exchange my spellstones just this once.

When I finally went to exchange my stones at the trade-in counter, the receptionist there got upset with me! I was at a complete loss. I double-checked with her that she wanted me to put them on the counter! *I didn't do anything wrong!*

Holding back tears, she told me to come back tomorrow for my receipt.

DAY 18
NIGHT
♦
INN
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

THE GUILD WORKERS guided us to the inn. The sign over the entrance read "Lady Finger Boudoir." Was this a love hotel or a bakery?!
What kind of sicko would bring twenty girls to a love hotel? Did they assess the Class Rep's skills and assume that she'd assembled a harem? I felt Class Rep's piercing stare. *Just thinking about delicious desserts! Yeah, pastries and tiramisu!* What skill made her eyes so sharp?
Looking closely, I realized that wasn't what was written on the sign. It actually said "Laddy Flinger Boudoir." *Someone call the cops! There's a monster throwing guys around; it's actually a hotel!*
"Welcome! The Adventurers' Guild told us you'd be coming."
A young girl stood by the entrance and passed out flyers for the Boudoir. What's a young girl doing advertising a love hotel? This is totally depraved!
I turned around. "Let's go back! The Adventurers' Guild has to answer for its degenerate recommendation! I'll burn them to the ground!"
"Excuse me, sir, please don't leave. Our inn merely has an odd name. Please don't burn anything!"
"No, this is unacceptable," I said. "Anyone who takes us to the Lady Finger Boudoir is a pervert targeting high school students. This is an obvious den of iniquity! Why would you name your inn that?"
The girl with the flyers was holding back her tears. She had a point when she told me to stay. Why waste my time burning down the Adventurers' Guild? This place is the real problem…
"Haruka-kun, why are you holding your staff like a rifle?" Class Rep asked. "Why did you just take aim at the inn? Did you just pull back an imaginary bolt-action lever?! Your eyes have the dark intensity of a trained assassin! You're making that poor girl cry! What's your problem?!"
"Huh? I won't shoot! Well, now I won't. I was just, y'know, indulging in my fantasies?"
"What kind of fantasies are those?! Is this what you think about when you visit an inn?"
"Class Rep," I implored, "could you imagine saying 'last night I stayed at the Lady Finger Boudoir?' We need to do something!"
She thought about it for a moment. "Fire."
Her wish was my command. Torching this place would be its own reward.
"Wait! No, don't shoot!" the flyers girl shouted. "The guild staff recommended us because we're a great inn. All of our many patrons choose

to stay because of our commitment to hospitality. Please don't destroy them…"
Tears began to fall onto the girl's stack of flyers. She was bawling.
Rolling my eyes, I said, "Fine. I won't fire."
I gave the girl a pat on the head. Her face flushed crimson, and she scampered inside.
"Pa, customers are here!"
There's always tomorrow, I thought. I can burn it down then.
Everyone glared at me like I was the pervert who named the place. *I don't deserve this kind of judgment!*
We piled into the building and enjoyed a delicious dinner. It was my first proper meal in ages, and it tasted incredible. The hot spring bath required an additional fee to use, but the rooms were decent. *It just needs a new damn name.*
The girl with the flyers told us that the Lady Finger Boudoir was named after a local hero from the owners' hometown. *What kind of parents would name their kid Lady Finger?*
When the town was pillaged by a swarm of monsters, Lady Finger led all the townspeople to safety and single-handedly drove off the monsters. He defeated all the monsters but succumbed to his wounds in the end. The town was utterly destroyed.
No one knew his real name, so they called him the Lady Finger. *Seriously, why?!*
To honor his memory and his heroism, they named the inn the Lady Finger Boudoir. *That hero would probably hate the name. Lady Finger, did he have delicate hands?*
"Ever since I was a tot, Ma, Pa, Grandma, and Grandpa all told me stories about him," said the girl with the flyers. "I only recently noticed that it's an odd name. But we're so grateful for him. I want to be just like him when I grow up!"
Looks like changing the name is out of the question, I thought. She's been brainwashed from a young age. Still, they should repaint the sign.
"When he helped us escape, he gave us a big grin, turned back and said, 'This here's my town. No chance of me leaving it. Gonna defend my home till my dying breath. I'm doing this for all of ya, so y'all need to build yourselves a new life somewhere else. Build a place that makes people smile.' He laughed as he made his last stand. We wanted our inn to be that place. That's why we named it after him."
Aside from the name, he did sound like a real legend.
There was no chance they'd be persuaded to change the name. They were the types who wouldn't change it even if it meant going bankrupt.
I went to my room to relax and check my stats.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human

LV: 09
JOB: —
HP: 120
MP: 122
VIT: 118
POW: 117
SPE: 118
DEX: 116
RES: 130
INT: 134
LUK: Max (Above Limit)
SP: 177
COMBAT SKILLS: Cane Mastery Lv6, Evasion Lv5, Foresight Lv5, Magic Infusion Lv6,
MAGIC: Heat Lv4, Movement Lv6, Weight Lv5, Packing Lv5, Four Elements Lv5, Wood Lv4, Lightning Lv3, Ice Lv2
SKILLS: General Health Lv3, Sensitivity Lv3, Calisthenics Lv4, Walking Lv6, Servitude Lv3, Appraisal Lv5, Clairvoyance Lv5, Presence Detection Lv6, Enemy Tracking Lv6, Magic Manipulation Lv6, Presence Concealment Lv5, Stealth Lv5, Hiding Lv4, Map Lv5, Focus Lv6, Physics Resistance Lv4, MP Regeneration Lv5, Stamina Regeneration Lv3, Parallel Thinking Lv3, Serial Thinking Lv3, Dash Lv1, Airwalk Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv4, NEET Lv3, Loner Lv4, Sorcerer Lv5
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv3, Master of None Lv3, Blockhead Lv3
EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Bag of Holding, Monster Bracelet Power +1% Speed +1%

As expected, I couldn’t fly, but I’d learned Dash. Did that just mean I could move even faster, or did it mean I could cause damage by crashing into things? Probably a little bit of both.
Then there was Airwalk. That sounded like a secret basketball technique, like a Chaos Dunk or some other slam jam. If I could really walk on air, I’d be eating roast pigeon for dinner in no time.
I was a Sorcerer now, too, and my intelligence and resistance were in the low 130s.
Did spellcasters in this world become more powerful by fighting monsters? That would explain why my Sorcerer level was going up so fast. *Maybe I’ll have to start fighting from the rear like other mages? This world can be so intimidating.*

DAY 18
NIGHT
He spent so much time developing his destructive talents that he never learned any social skills.
LADY FINGER BOUDOIR
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' SUITE

WE GOT FIVE four-person suites and one single room. That last one was for Haruka-kun.

We saved some money by booking rooms of four, but the main reason was safety. Once we were more familiar with this town, rooms of two would be fine. Everyone made it their goal to learn Presence Detection and Enemy Tracking. Right now only about half of us knew one of those skills, and only four of us knew both.

Honestly, we were doing great! We only started training in earnest one week ago. When we started, even the people who knew those skills didn't know how to use them, but now we could stand guard in shifts.

Haruka-kun, on the other hand, casually picked up skills left and right. He showed more enthusiasm when he first caught a fish. Anyone who sounded so bored while talking about learning how to magically fly was definitely not normal. Everyone else had to work so hard just to learn a few measly skills.

We only needed to spend half a day splitting up and gathering gossip. People readily opened up to us since we were normal-looking girls who knew how to talk to them.

Haruka-kun, in comparison, terrified everyone in the guildhall with a few words and practically had to be put in solitary confinement. I guess he spent so much time developing his destructive talents that he never learned any social skills. I had to smooth things over myself. Afterwards, he was given special permission to exchange his spellstones, but he ended up causing a desperate panic at the trade-in counter. He caused trouble everywhere he went, but he was totally oblivious to it. In any case, we got all the information we needed from asking around. There was good and bad news.

The good news was that this town was relatively safe. Apparently, Oda-kun and his friends had something to do with that. They visited town every once in a while. No one wanted to cause any trouble with them around.

That meant that they either traveled between Omui and other towns or had a campsite nearby. Shimazaki-san should finally be able to find them soon. I could hardly believe how much Shimazaki-san and her friends had changed. From talking to them I knew that this was who they really were, deep down. Their lives couldn't have been easy. They used to be so aggressive, exclusionary, and conceited, but that was all a defense mechanism for how

scared and unsure they really were. But no one would help them if they acted like that in this world. Even so, they hid any signs of weakness.
Then they found themselves alone in a monster-ridden forest and were attacked by those delinquents. We had kept them at arm's length, showing them no trust or kindness. We treated them like outcasts.
They really thought they were going to die. In that moment of despair, they must have realized how awful they had been. They wanted to apologize to Oda-kun before they died. They needed to make amends.
At first, we didn't believe them. How could we?
Nonetheless, they apologized to us and vanished into the forest in search of Oda-kun and his friends.
The five of them were level one, having never fought a single monster, but they still went off into the woods. We weren't going to help them. Our hearts had closed off to them.
Honestly, we should've died in those woods, too. We should have been annihilated by all those monsters. That was the only future left for us. Yet, we were saved. Our attitude was totally wrong.
Facing certain doom, with hearts full of despair, we had all given up. Then a ray of hope penetrated our gloom in the form of Haruka-kun just being himself.
Of course, I was overjoyed that we triumphed against death and kicked despair to the curb. We thought that all other alternatives were impossible. No one wanted to die, but we had given up on life. Haruka-kun showed us that things didn't have to be that way. He did it in an easy, carefree manner, like life was *fun*.
He taught us that giving up hope was just an excuse. Because of him, our despair faded away completely.
Soon, we were all smiles again. We felt like we could imagine a tomorrow. Life became joyful.
Haruka-kun slayed our doubts.
If I could live forever…even if I could, I wouldn't want to do it without him. We didn't have him before, and it was a complete disaster. At last, I felt untroubled.
But I hadn't even gotten to the bad news. For Haruka-kun, it was worse than anything we could've imagined.

DAY 19
MORNING
Being called a Class Rep is the highest form of praise.
LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

ANOTHER UNFAMILIAR CEILING. It was the first time I could think that in ages. I really thought I'd go the rest of my life without making that *Evangelion* reference again! It really was an unfamiliar ceiling!

It wasn't just an unfamiliar cave in some unfamiliar woods. It sure as hell wasn't an unfamiliar high school girl—none of them were unfamiliar at this point. I didn't care whether this place was called the Lady Finger Boudoir or the Laddy Flinger Boudoir, it had an authentic unfamiliar ceiling. I may have seen it before I went to sleep, but I think it was still unfamiliar enough when I woke up!

Seriously, how did it take me nearly twenty days to run into a new ceiling?

"At last, I've reached a town," I said to myself. "Is this the completion of my quest? Game over? Credits roll?"

At that moment, Class Rep stepped into the room. "Good morning, Haruka-kun. I hope it's not game over for you. Reaching a town wasn't your goal in the first place, so I doubt you've completed your quest. Why do you phrase everything as a question, anyway?!"

Instead of a wake-up call, this inn offered a wake-up scold.

"Good morning, Class Rep," I said. "You look very classy and representative today."

"Why do you look like you think you paid me a big compliment? Don't be smug. And stop calling me Class Rep already! We haven't been in school for nearly three weeks!"

Apparently the Class Rep didn't understand that I was giving her the highest form of praise possible, at least in my book.

"So, what's up? Couldn't wait for breakfast? Do you miss grilled mushrooms that much?"

"Why do you think I'm always looking for food? Are you? I came to talk, not eat!"

My mistake, she didn't have the Gluttony skill after all. *Maybe it was another one of her skills she…uh, never mind!*

"We learned some things at the guild yesterday," she said. "So…I need to tell you something. You should sit down for this, okay?"

She made it sound like I'd fall into a pit of despair when I heard the news.

"Oh, you heard about the level wall?"

"What? You knew?"

Yep, she just found out and was trying to find a gentle way to break it to me.

No one wanted to be the bearer of bad news—they always rehearsed a

million different scenarios in their head, trying to find the perfect way to deliver the truth. But I had to find out eventually, since the level wall was an unavoidable fact of this world.
All combat techniques required a minimum level in a relevant combat skill. If I was a sword fighter, for example, my Sword Mastery skill would need to be level 20 before I could learn basic techniques like Slash and Thrust. Of course, lacking those techniques didn't prevent me from slashing and thrusting with a sword, but combat techniques were far more powerful than any regular attack.
That was the level wall. It was the real reason levels meant everything in this world—your level determined what techniques were available to you. High-level defensive combat techniques could completely neutralize any normal attack. It didn't matter what my stats were, I'd still lose to a higher-level opponent.
Monsters knew combat techniques, and they never took prisoners. Without access to combat techniques, I was inevitably doomed. *Game over.*
That was why the Class Rep came here so early in the morning, looking so worried. Only she would be so caring and sensitive. That's what made her the Class Rep. No one wanted to tell someone such bad news, but it had to be done. In matters of life and death, it was better to know. She knew I might have blamed her and even hated her, but she did the difficult thing anyway.
"That one old guy told me. You know, not the first old man or the second one, but the third guy—do you remember him?"
"Oh, you mean Guild Master Hakiess? Okay, you only know three old men, but you couldn't remember any of their names or even that one of them is the guild master?"
"Thanks for trying to tell me about the level wall anyway, Class Rep. Did you lose sheep on my account?"
The Class Rep had dark circles under her eyes. She must have stayed up late thinking of ways to tell me.
"Lost *sheep?* Sheep have nothing to do with it! Sleep, not sheep!"
Huh? Don't you count sheep when you have trouble sleeping? She looks like she kept losing count. I wonder how all the sheep are doing back in the real world.
Fish girl dropped by with breakfast—*bread!* How I missed bread! Sweet… rock-hard bread. *Most rocks are softer than this.*
"If it's a world with bread, it's a world with flour! Let's go buy flour and never look back! And any other ingredients we can carry! It will all belong to me! All the food will be mine! Bwa ha ha!"
"All the food?" cried Fish Girl. "How did gnawing on that bread turn you into a megalomaniac?"
Was Fish Girl upset because I didn't like the bread? If she really was raised by fish like she kept saying, no wonder she had strong feelings about hunks of bread.

“You’re homesick, aren’t you?” I said. “It’s okay, I feel you. Don’t worry. I’m sure your mom and dad are swimming merrily across the seven seas.”
“My mom and dad *are not fish!”*
Why was she admonishing me? *She said they were fish, didn’t she?* Maybe she meant that her parents were *named* Mr. and Mrs. Fish?! Sometimes the real world was more fanciful than a fantasy world.
“So, what’s our plan for the day?” I asked. “Heading out soon? Think we should stop by the guild? We should make a quick stop at the guild, yeah?”
If we wanted to go shopping, we’d need to go to the guild first, since I was totally broke.
“You make going to the guild sound like getting a morning coffee!”
“Well, I do remember seeing a sign on the wall advertising discount drinks. What if they have a café?”
It said drinks cost 100 eles on a sign, which meant that an ele was roughly equal to a yen. Maybe there were 100-ele shops? *Definitely no bookstores, though…*
Money was my first concern. I may have turned in a lot of F-class magic stones, but I doubted they were worth much.
It wasn’t like I needed to be rich. At level 9, I couldn’t even equip new weapons or armor—not even leather armor. And I didn’t want to become an adventurer in the first place. *Should I just stay unemployed?*
However, I was desperate for new food and kitchen supplies, especially spices! At least I had a seemingly limitless supply of salt. Just how much salt did Villager A buy?

DAY 19
MORNING
The nonsense spellstone ranking system is one of the great mysteries of all time.
OMUI GUILD

NO ONE TRIED to pick a fight with me or even dared look me in the eye this time. The crowd parted to let me through. Sure, it was convenient, but… were they scared? I walked up to the trade-in counter.
"We must offer our apologies," the receptionist said. "Please accept all the money that we have. This is all we can give you right now. We promise to pay the rest soon!"
"Our deepest apologies," chimed in the other staff.
Uh…I didn't commit a robbery, did I? I'm not a thief! I'm not even an adventurer, I'm pretty much a hobo! I don't even have a legal address! I can say I live in a cave, but that sounds so sketchy!
The guild master appeared besides me and slapped my shoulder. "Sorry 'bout that," he said. "Your spellstones were worth so much that it depleted all of our reserves. I hope you don't mind if we pay you in installments."
"Please!" chimed in the staff.
I still feel like I'm robbing them, I thought. They should be so suspicious of me! I would be!
"Normally we turn away spellstones we can't buy," the guild master explained. "But because you're not an adventurer, we technically shouldn't buy them from you in the first place. And it would be *such* a pity if you ended up trading in this massive volume of spellstones anywhere else."
He explained that the guild charged a ten percent fee for every spellstone trade. This was a guild-wide policy, so headquarters got a cut on top of that, too.
Since the income was used to help the guild and its adventurers, members were forbidden from selling spellstones to other merchants. If they did, the guild expelled them. Since I wasn't an adventurer, they couldn't use the threat of expulsion.
He felt guilty about taking ten percent of the trade from someone who couldn't enjoy guild benefits, so he offered his apologies.
I wouldn't have gotten in trouble if I tried selling them elsewhere. The guild was willing to pay a fair price for the spellstones, but I turned in so many that they didn't have enough cash on hand. If I sold all my spellstones elsewhere, it would have thrown off the economy, hurting guild operations.
"Of course, I can't force you, and it's not my place to ask you for a favor. Please accept my apologies."

I appreciated the concern, but I didn't mind. He rattled off so many issues that I couldn't get a word in edgewise.
At last, the receptionist, who looked like she might have lost a few sheep herself, resolved the matter in a quiet, shy voice.
"If you sell those stones to us, we'll buy you a new set of clothes."
"It's okay. Sorry for making you stay up so late counting." I turned to address the guild master. "Maybe you should give her and her staff a bonus?"
I really didn't care about the money. In a world without bookstores, no amount of money could buy books.
"Even if I can't become an adventurer, Class Rep and the others registered, and the four nerds must have registered as well. I really don't mind. Just look after all twenty-four of those people. That helps me, too."
The guild staff breathed out and relaxed. The receptionist literally jumped for joy. The guild master, eyebrow twitching, lectured her about professionalism in the workplace. *You have my sympathies—I get scolded for no reason, too.*
For the time being, they gave me 8 million ele. *Are you…serious?* No wonder they were going bankrupt! They could've bargained the price down a little!
"Well, that must be payment for almost everything, right?" I asked. "Aren't F-class spellstones the least valuable?"
The scolded receptionist came around the counter to explain. She was probably trying to escape another lecture.
"Allow me to explain. S-class stones come from legendary monsters, A-class stones from unstoppable monsters. Defeating a monster with a B-class spellstone would require all the combined might and resources of an entire nation to even have a chance. If the guild mustered all of its resources, it might be able to take on a monster with a C-class stone. A party of first-rate adventurers might be able to get their hands on one D-class stone, or one of those adventurers alone could probably get an E-class stone.
Everything else is F-class. Almost all of our dealings are in F-class spellstones. D-class spellstones are rare enough to impress a king."
That ranking system was totally useless! What's the point of all those rankings if anything above an F-class stone was unimaginably rare and hard to get?
"From there we divide the F-class spellstones into subclasses F1 to F10, with plus and minus grades in each subclass. Altogether, that makes for over thirty types of F-class stones."
"But why stop at F?!" I exclaimed. "Why not just keep going until you hit Z? This system makes no sense!"
"A great observation! That's a mystery for the ages. Scholars and philosophers have asked that very question throughout history," she said.
"Moving on, you brought one F10+ stone, which is the most valuable. Most

of the spellstones we get are between F5 and F8. The F10+ alone is worth more than 10 million ele. You've bankrupted us with just one stone!"
As she grew more flustered, I realized that this receptionist was the same person who cried and glared at me from behind the trade-in counter yesterday. Did she also appraise the stones? She seemed like an expert.
Apparently, there'd been a spellstone shortage going on, so I had raked in an absurd profit. I had more money than in my wildest dreams.
"Are you sure you want to do this?" the guild master asked. "From a completely selfish perspective, there's really no benefit for you. It's not something we would expect anyone to agree to…"
"It's fine. If you didn't accept, I would've just had the Class Rep and the others sell them on my behalf. I plan to learn all kinds of guild secrets and lore from them, anyway."
"Don't just casually say things like that in front of all the guild staff, not to mention *me*!" the guild master said. "We haven't discussed anything that's supposed to be a secret, anyway. I was hoping you'd want to learn from the guild, so I'll just pretend I didn't hear that."
Eventually we settled on a long-term payment plan. Until the accounts were settled, the guild would help finance anything the girls or I needed. It was good to have the guild on our side. Still, it felt like they were only helping us under duress.
"Seems like a good time to go shopping, then. Is there anywhere you recommend?"
After the guild staff directed me to various local merchants, I headed toward the front door. The Class Rep called over to me before I left.
"Wait up, Haruka-kun. Can I talk to you for a minute?"
Wasn't it convenient that the Class Rep wanted to chat as soon as I struck it rich? *Her uncanny timing is terrifying!*
"What do you want? Mugging? Blackmail? Extortion? Sheep?"
She didn't seem to know what to do about the sudden windfall. *Just like a worried mother.* I knew what she wanted to talk about when she started nervously picking at the drawstring of the bag full of spellstones I gave her for safekeeping.
"Oh, those?" I said, gesturing to the bag. "Nah, just keep it. What if something happened?"
"But it's worth so much money! I kind of feel nervous carrying this around with me," she said. "Besides, I don't have much more room in my own bag."
I gave her the bag as a sort of rainy-day fund in case her weapon broke or someone got hurt. Was she concerned because the emergency fund ended up being much more money than expected?
"If you don't end up using all of it, just give me whatever's left over later, I guess?"
"You'll just say you don't care and tell me to keep the change! Money is important, you know?"

I lived rent-free in a cave, got all my groceries for free by picking mushrooms, and wore indestructible clothes. Money was a foreign concept in my lifestyle. *What's money? Does it taste good?*
Besides, as a loner, I never had and never would spend money on socializing! *Let's not think about that!*
"Keep it," I said. "This is just in case something happens. And if nothing happens, that's even better, right?"
"You're right, thanks," the Class Rep said. "I'll spend it wisely."
Now that I'd finally persuaded Class Rep, was I allowed to go shopping?
Out on the street, the old dude with a spear waved at me.
He said, "Hey, kiddo! I told you I needed to thank you proper-like. I've got to show you something real nice! Let me take ya there!"
Oh? He's going to show me something "real nice?" Was he going to bring me to a place filled with cute, giggling girls? Would it be named something like the Puff-Puff Parlor? That would make up for the weeks of seeing nothing but ugly, grunting goblins in the woods.
"Er, isn't that more of an evening activity?"
Almost as soon as I said that, Enemy Tracking pinged twenty foes nearby.
How do they know what I'm thinking?
"You crack me up, kiddo," the spearman said. "I'm not taking you to that kind of place. We're going to an armory! It might have a weird vibe, but it's a great hole-in-the-wall joint."
I've had enough of this geezer! Should I give him back to the Greenwolves?
I couldn't use most items at level 9, but this money wasn't going to spend itself. Besides, if they sold anything useful in there, I could tell the Class Rep about it later. In any case, this was his way of thanking me. He made this armory sound like something unique, too. I had no reason not to check it out.
Nonetheless, as a teenager, I would've rather gone to the paradise of cute, giggling girls.

DAY 19
LUNCH
Goodbye, sweet sex appeal.
AN ARMORY?

THIS PLACE LOOKED more like a food cart than an armory. I'm not sure you could even call this a store… It looks like a pile of junk.

"You can find all kinds of weird stuff and mysterious items over here," he said. "I can tell—this store was totally made for you, kiddo."

I couldn't equip normal gear, so he took me to the most suspicious and disreputable shop I'd ever seen. *Should I be offended?*

While I could use Appraisal, I didn't actually know anything about weapons. Oh well, it wasn't like I had anything to lose by looking. I browsed the wares on display, picking up any that caught my eye and appraising them.

"Mistletoe Sprig: A wooden stick. Staff power-up. ? ? ?"

More question marks. Was the proprietor just gathering weapons that had question marks in the description?

"Spiked Shoulder Pads: Brutality bonus."

Uh, yeah, this junk is awful. Anyone who wears these is guaranteed to turn into a villain.

"VII Necklace +30% (Seven Slots)."

Slots? Did that mean this necklace worked like my Bag of Holding? Ever since my Appraisal hit level 5, I noticed that my "Cloak?", "Leather Gloves?", "Leather Boots?", "Clothes Set?", and "Wooden Stick?" all had "Seven Slots" added to their descriptions. Were they all part of the same set?

I turned to the hooded shopkeeper. His face seemed to be frozen in a gap-toothed rictus with sunken eyes, giving the impression of a skeleton wearing a human suit. I wasn't sure I wanted to buy anything, but at least I could get some free information.

I said, "Hey, what's up with this necklace? What does 'Seven Slots' even mean?"

"Oh ho ho, sonny, you've got a good eye in that head of yours. That means you can store the effects of other items. Only items that equip to the same slot work, and each item effect only has 30% effectiveness when it's stored in the necklace."

That sounds so useful. I could always use higher poison or sleep resistance, and if I could get my hands on amulets for every type of resistance, I'd be unstoppable.

Of course, the effects only being 30% effective wasn't ideal. Even a 100% poison resistance item would only give me 30% resistance after it was slotted. Still, it was better than nothing, and I hadn't found another

necklace yet, anyway. With this much money, “nice to have” was enough of a reason to buy something.
More importantly, what was up with all the question marks in the Mistletoe Sprig description? I would love to power up my Sylvan Staff. I didn’t know how it worked, but I wanted any power-ups I could find.
Since I didn’t have any other weapons, I figured that I might as well grab it.
“Mirror Cloak: Reflects magic attacks via Minor Reflection Enchantment.”
That sounded useful. I hadn’t been attacked by magic yet, but I didn’t have a way to resist magic attacks without something like this. And since it was a cloak, I could store it in my “Cloak?” with six slots to spare. I doubted that it could totally reflect all magic attacks, but if I leveled it up and used it alongside my skills, it could be a good way to counter magic. *Even if it’s expensive, I’m throwing my money at it! Give it to me!*
The spear guy was picking his teeth and yawning. *Don’t rush me, you’re the one who brought me here in the first place!* It was my right—nay, duty—to browse. If I didn’t inspect every last item, how could I be sure I bought the right things?
There was a lot more good stuff here than I anticipated, and I was filthy rich. I never expected to go on a shopping spree in a fantasy world.
I saw “Knife-Proof Clothes Set: Cannot be torn.” That sounded good, but my current outfit never tore, burned, or got dirty. I noticed another clothing set that gave strength and power +7 but otherwise seemed kind of weak. If I was going for power, the “Fire Staff: Fire Magic +10%” would be far more effective. As soon as I saw that, I saw other gear that gave 20% and 30% bonuses, making 10% worthless in comparison.
“Knife-Proof Cap: Cannot be torn.” Meh, even if I can’t be stabbed in the head, my head can still get crushed. What’s the point of headgear that isn’t a helmet?!
“Mana Cutter: A magical sword with uncanny sharpness. Min. Lv50.” *An actual sword!*
I wanted it, but I was nowhere near the minimum level. I could still buy it and swing it around, even if the magic didn’t activate, right?
Huh? I noticed something even stranger: “Void Staff: Super effective for users of Void Magic.” I had to learn Void Magic to even use it?! What the hell was the point? *The staff should do the work for me!* Might as well call it a Rip-off Staff! It was like a scam targeting the elderly! I was nearly convinced myself! Nearly. *Should I get it just in case?*
Maybe it would come in handy one day. No, what was I thinking? I was looking for things I *needed*, things that were actively beneficial. I couldn’t base my purchases on wishful thinking!
That old guy with the spear left for dinner. *How rude!* He couldn’t even wait for me? Even the shop owner was holding back tears and looking like he wanted me to leave! *Come on, I’m only getting started, don’t they know that patience is a virtue?*

I had a Ring of the Destitute, but it made me nervous, so I usually ignored it. When I pulled it out and used Appraisal, I saw that it also had the Seven Slots tag. *Rings!* I thought. *I'll collect all the rings!* For some reason, the shop owner was reluctant to show me any jewelry. What was his problem?! *Hurry up and show me! Show me, show me, show me!*

"I beg you," the shop owner whimpered. "I'll give you anything: coupons, discounts, freebies, loyalty cards. Just pick something already. I'm dead tired and haven't eaten all day. Everything aches…"

The spearman came back and said, "Hey, kiddo, the shop owner looks like he's about to keel over. Why don'tcha just buy something? I'm barely able to keep my lids open, m'self. It's gotten so dark you can't hardly see his merch, anyway."

This was pathetic. Wasn't the customer supposed to always be right? If he would just help me out a little, I would buy so much stuff from him!

"Don't worry about me. I can see just fine since I've got Night Vision and Appraisal. Do you want to use a magic lantern?"

"We want to go home!" they shouted at me.

What were they, lost kids? The Class Rep, who was passing by on a night patrol, was roped into convincing me to leave.

After careful and exhaustive deliberation, I had at last finalized my candidates. I just started my final round of winnowing my shopping cart, but they were clamoring to kick me out!

Since they were being so pushy, I settled on buying everything I'd picked out so far. Surely, that wouldn't be a waste of money.

"Can you ring me up?" I said, dumping everything on the shop counter.

"You want to buy…everything? We have fair prices, and I know you helped Gatek, so I want to give you a good deal, but you've picked out some of my most expensive wares. It'll cost you over 10 million ele."

"Can't you just make it under 8 million ele? That's all I have, and I'll haggle all night if I have to."

"Please no!" they all yelled.

The Class Rep looked over what I wanted to buy and made me put back a few items. Without the "Glittering Cloak: Sparkles with style," "Vase of Good Fortune: A vase that is said to bring happiness to the home it is placed in," and "Pheromone Ring: May raise wearer's appeal to the opposite sex," the total price dropped to 8 million ele. *I really wanted that last one though, okay?*

"May raise wearer's appeal to the opposite sex" sounded amazing. *Fine, I'll put it back,* I thought.

Pheromone Ring happened to be the most expensive product, costing 2.6 million ele. The shopkeep tossed the ring into a pile of jewelry at the back of his cart. *Goodbye, sweet sex appeal.*

DAY 19
DUSK
If you don’t bring back souvenirs in Omui, you’re legally bankrupt.
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

I WAS SO HUNGRY AND TIRED, but the Class Rep yelled at me when I admitted that I couldn’t pay for my lodgings and dinner. *Will there ever be a day when I’m not scolded?*

“Didn’t I just tell you that money is important?” the Class Rep said. “How did you bankrupt yourself already?! Do you think you’re a spendthrift decadent poet who can blame society for your terrible decisions?! You’re no Baudelaire!”

All I did was go shopping? Was she upset that I didn’t buy her a souvenir? How could she treat me like a beggar and scoundrel? No one truly understands my heart’s deep melancholy. Society made me what I am.

The guild ended up covering my debts, since they still owed me. I snuck up to my room with all of my new goodies. No shopping spree was complete without the joy of seeing everything I got. I sorted out my purchases by category. I put the gloves on my bed, but the cloaks were too bulky, so I spread them on the floor. The rings fit nicely on the side table.

“Uhm…what was this again?” I said to myself. “The Evasion Cloak, huh?”

I might’ve bought too much stuff—I was losing track of what anything was. I stifled a yawn and realized that I needed to sleep. With all this junk everywhere, I couldn’t sleep in my bed.

“Crap, it’s almost morning. Wait, am I already asleep?”

That was enough for today. I could store all the extra equipment in my Seven Slots equipment, right? Whoa, they merged! At least I didn’t need to tidy anymore—time to sleep. *But what should I do about money? And my sex appeal?! Goodbye, sweet sex appeal…goodbye.*

DAY 20
MORNING
Does this count as a liquidity crisis? What are the capital finance regulations around here, anyway?
ARMORY

I WAS FRESH OUT of cash. The guild owed me plenty, but I had nothing on hand.

Does this count as a liquidity crisis? What are the capital finance regulations around here anyway? As a hardworking NEET, a socially active shut-in, and a lucky loner, I wanted my money.

Did I have anything else that I could sell? The guild was paying me in installments, but they had just given me all their cash yesterday. I doubted they could give me my next payment yet. I checked my bag for any surplus.

I went to a normal armory even though I couldn't afford or equip any of the stuff they stocked. I spoke to the balding shopkeeper.

"Hey, gramps, do you want to buy some goblin clubs?"

I had tons of clubs taking up space. Even if they weren't worth much, I'd at least get something.

"I'll take 'em off your hands. They ain't worth much, mind you. Best I can do is 500 ele per club."

What a rip off! He was selling them for 1000 to 2000 ele but buying them for only 500. That was at least a 100 percent markup! I guess there were the store expenses and the balding guy's salary, but still. Although, back in the old world, selling used books never got me more than 100 yen per volume. This deal was starting to sound incredible.

"How many will you buy from me?"

If I could sell ten, then that would net me 5000 ele, enough for living expenses.

"We're an armory. Sell me everything you got. Didn't ya see the sign that says 'buy and sell?'"

As expected from a legitimate business, they didn't turn away any honest customers trying to sell. The baldy was a shop owner I could trust.

"Okay, here ya go."

I poured my bag out on the counter and watched the clubs pour over and clatter across the floor. Baldy stared, speechless. The color drained from his face until he was pale enough to be mistaken for a cue ball.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"I apologize!" he cried. "I spoke too hastily! I can only buy fifty clubs!"

So much for being an honest, upstanding, bald business owner. At least he still bought fifty of them. I needed cold hard cash. I didn't want the Class Rep to give me another lecture about financial prudence.

“That’s all I can buy from you right now,” the baldy said. “Even fifty’s more than I would normally take, but I don’t want you inflicting that fright on someone else.”
“Why can’t you just sell one club to every person in Omui?” I asked. “That would cover all of them.”
“What kind of nightmare town has every single person walking around with a goblin club?!” shouted the balding guy. “We’d scare off all the tourists! Every fight between spouses would demolish the town!”
I guess I wouldn’t want to go to that town either, I thought. I eventually convinced him to buy fifty-one goblin clubs and one wooden stick, among them the extra weapons from the boss goblin and kobold chieftain.
He didn’t need any persuading to buy the boss weapons—they were apparently worth way more. They looked the same to me. Maybe the boss goblin’s club made a good decoration or something. He couldn’t decide how many of the rarer clubs from higher-level goblins to buy. *This guy must be the worst to go shopping with—some people have no respect for other people’s time*. Seriously, couldn’t he hurry it up a bit?
Finally, he said, “I won’t have any money left after this. I won’t be able to buy from you again any time soon, but with this lineup of clubs, we’ll have the best collection in the country!”
Why was baldy so obsessed with wooden clubs? Wasn’t he a blacksmith?
I figured that the next time I stopped in, he’d have converted it into a specialty club shop. He was totally obsessed.

DAY 20
MORNING
♦
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

WITH THE CASH I'd earned, I went back to the inn to pay for my room.
"Here you go, Flyers Girl," I declared, handing it over.
"Ooh, thank you, honored guest!"
I was rich—a millionaire! I'd expected to get 25,000 ele or so, but I walked out with a cool 1.6 million in my bag.
The first night plus one meal was 4500 ele, and subsequent nights had a 300 ele discount. Most meals cost between 500 and 1500 ele, while using the public bath cost another 1000 ele.
Should I become a regular patron of this place? I felt like I could live here, not that I wanted to be associated with a place called "The Lady Finger Boudoir." I smirked at the thought.
"Haruka-kun?" the Class Rep asked. "Uh…how'd you get all that money? Yesterday you were completely broke. I even needed to lend you money yesterday, so why do you look so smug today?! Why do your finances keep seesawing so wildly?!"
"What? How could you *possibly* go from having 8 million ele to nothing, then back to 1.6 million ele overnight?!" the others shouted.
The Class Rep confiscated all my money from me. Diabolic, fiendish treachery! *This is the tyranny of a prudent mother!* The Class Rep told me that she wouldn't allow me to carry more than 50,000 ele at a time.
It's true that I didn't need weapons. But I needed medicine, food, and daily necessities! Maybe there was some good stuff at the general store? I knew the location of a good general store thanks to the guild. 50,000 ele was hardly enough for another shopping spree. *I don't have a spending problem!*
Vice Rep B came back and heard what happened.
"You got your money confiscated?" She shook her head, though that wasn't the shaking I noticed. "What a bummer. You were in the middle of planning another shopping trip too, weren't you?"
The shaking and swaying was such a distraction that I was afraid those endowments would be declared contraband and confiscated as well…
Impossible, there's too much to confiscate!
"Haruka-kun, thanks for worrying about the rest of us, but you should focus on how you handle your own money," said Vice Rep A. "We're all worried about you."
Fortunately, as an A, there wasn't enough to bother confiscating.

“She took my money too, Haruka-kun!” chimed in Vice Rep C. “She said I didn’t need another dress…and I only fit into stuff from the kids’ section, anyway.”

Vice Rep C had absolutely nothing to confiscate. Should I start referring to them by size? Vice Reps A, AA, and E…or possibly F…even G? Uh, don’t mind me.

Enemy Tracking snapped me from my reverie and alerted me to two…no, three enemies! Were assassins targeting me? *This world is filled with menace.*

DAY 20
MORNING
♦
GENERAL STORE

A STORE WITH NO NAME—it used to have one, but the sign was faded and illegible. The guild receptionist told me that this place had the best selection.

“Do you have any seasonings and food that won’t spoil?” I asked the shopkeeper. “And daily necessities?”

She was pretty in a way that must have made her very popular when she was five years younger. I could imagine myself stopping by every day to see a more youthful version of her.

“Are you a traveler?” she asked. “We have salt, pepper, and four types of herbs. We also have sugar if you don’t mind paying a premium.”

Sauces were too modern, I supposed, and soy sauce was more of an Asian thing. It’d still be good to have some herbs.

“Do you have any preserved foods other than dried meat?” I asked.

“We have wheat and barley flours, dried potatoes, and dried persimmons. We also have dried mushrooms, but they’re on the expensive side as well. Our potatoes and bread keep the longest. We also have a wide variety of vegetables.”

I spent such a long time in the forest that I was surprised they had normal food like potatoes. Mushrooms were expensive, but I had too many to begin with.

I checked out what else was being sold.

“Black Hat: Stealth bonus. Defense +30. Presence Concealment.” Shouldn’t this be at the Armory? I didn’t expect the general store to carry good adventuring gear like this.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Oh, I got that off a thief who tried to rob the store. I stripped him of his possessions. It’s the only thing that hasn’t sold. You can have it for the low price of 1000 ele!”

Oh yeah! That’s a steal! Gotta get that, I thought. It looked like a knit cap, but it still gave defense a hefty boost. Using Appraisal, I noticed that this old—well, just lady—was pretty powerful.

Soap was expensive but necessary. I also bought a towel and handcloth. I had my toothbrush from the real world, but I didn’t know if I could trust the tooth-cleaning powder here. I didn’t see anything better, though. The toothbrushes here were basically sticks, so I had to make sure mine didn’t break.

From looking around the store, I could tell that this civilization was more advanced than the real middle ages. They even had spoons and other utensils, although they were all carved from wood. From what I knew of real medieval history, people didn't use anything besides their hands and a knife to eat.

They had glassware, but it was cloudy, brown, lumpy, and very expensive. I got a potion vial just in case. They had paper, but it was expensive and so rough and heavy that it was practically papyrus. There was also a huge range in the quality of the metalwork. I'd never before considered that a general store could demonstrate all the technological achievements of a civilization, even if we were still a long way off from the twentieth century.

The Class Rep entered the store.

"Great timing," I called over to her. "I just ran out of my allowance!"

"I only gave that to you a few hours ago! How did you spend all of it so fast? I gave you ele equivalent to nearly a hundred thousand yen! Do I look like Doraemon to you? Do you think I can just pull something out of my pouch to help you?"

She glared at me with the intensity of a thousand suns. Oh mighty and terrible Lord Glare, I beg forgiveness for my sins!

If one ele was about one yen, why did she only give me 50,000 ele? That was half of what she just said!

Regardless, I handed over my purchases to the shopkeeper.

"And here's the souvenir dried fruit," she said, wrapping up the purchases. "Enjoy!"

Now I knew I wasn't legally bankrupt! I had souvenirs! The Almighty Lord of the Glare directed her gaze at the dried fruit.

Everyone was only mad at me yesterday because I forgot to get souvenirs! *I need to be better at keeping other people in mind,* I thought.

"You can't yell at me this time," I informed Class Rep. "This time I remembered the souvenirs."

She did yell at me, but it wasn't as bad as last time. The dried fruit did have some effect.

"You're hopeless," she fumed before handing me five more silver coins, another 50,000 ele. We parted ways outside; she said she had to get back to the inn so they could have another girls' meeting. Next time, I resolved to get enough souvenirs that they wouldn't get annoyed.

DAY 20
AFTERNOON

It was pretty terrible that high school girls, during such a sensitive period in their lives, were given such a weird nickname.

OMUI GUILD

I SCANNED THE LIST of guild jobs again. I thought, *We're in a fantasy world, right? And I'm in a fantasy guild where people put their lives on the line, right? So why are all of the jobs so…mundane?* These were all reliable, boring jobs! Didn't anyone want to live a little? Where was all the ambition and fantasy?! This was basically the public employment office! *The greatest nemesis of any NEET!*

Construction work: I didn't mind the idea, but it didn't pay much.

Same problem with shipping work.

Security assignments had long hours but still didn't pay much.

Monster hunting: goblins and wolves were worth the least. Should I just go kill as many as I could?

All the tasks seemed…too normal. There were no legendary dragons, demonic monstrosities, or any get-rich-quick quests at all. It was as lame as could be. They even listed the working hours for each job.

"Haruka-san, why have you been staring at the classifieds for so long?"

The receptionist really *did* know how to do her job. Someone who got scolded, instead of delivering the reprimands! *Receptionist, you're nothing like Class Rep!*

"I've got no money, so I was thinking…could I kill some monsters on the down low to earn some cash?"

No! How can this be? Even the receptionist is glaring at me! She's evolved into the Class Rep-ceptionist!

I got morning glares from the Class Rep, afternoon glares from the receptionist. What awaited me tonight? Could I find some sketchy nightlife? Maybe I would get the kind of adult glares that really got me going? *That old spear guy still had to deliver on his promise.*

"Don't say that so loud! We would prefer that you act with a bit more subtlety overall," said the receptionist dryly. "You just keep looking at the job board without a care if anyone sees you."

"Huh? No one here looks at me in the first place, so I figured no one would notice?"

I scanned the hall, and just as I expected, no one met my gaze. There was obviously no problem!

"Didn't we just give you 8 million ele yesterday? Were you mugged?"

“Oh, that? The spear dude took me to this really weird shop, but I had such a great time that I ended up staying way too late into the night. It wasn’t at all what I expected, but I learned so many new things there. It looked really unsavory on the outside, but it was the kind of place where I just couldn’t stop myself from spending all the money I had, you know?”
Weirdly, just as I was wrapping up telling the receptionist about that suspicious shop, the spear dude walked in, went bright red, and quickly dragged her away to explain something. Was there something going on between them?

If I left town, I could only get back in with identification papers. I wasn’t an adventurer or a business owner, so I couldn’t get any kind of guild card, and I wasn’t a resident, so I didn’t have residency papers. *What’s a NEET to do?* Without identification, I’d have to pay to enter, but I was flat broke for some reason. I wanted to go hunting to earn some money, but I couldn’t get paid without paying the entry fee I couldn’t afford! *Being a NEET is a catch-22!* I should’ve guessed how hard town life would be.
My only option was to sneak out and sneak back in. The whole town was surrounded by a two-meter-high wall, which I could easily leap over with Airwalk. However, if I was caught, everyone would lecture me. The Class Rep would take over when the gatekeeper got tired; they’d tag-team me. I wouldn’t be able to smooth things over with dried fruit souvenir bribes.
I was wearing my Cloak? (Seven Slots) with the stored effect of Invisibility Cloak: Others less likely to notice you. I still had five more slots to fill.
I wasn’t sure how it worked. My body didn’t disappear or anything, but it seemed like people had more trouble noticing me. Maybe my shadow was paler? As long as I was careful, no one would spot me. *Just think sneaky. No one will know I was ever gone if I come back right away. This was like a longer version of the five second rule.* I activated Presence Concealment and Stealth, put on my “Black Hat: Stealth bonus. Defense +30. Presence Concealment” and pulled my hood over it. The only thing left was—
A hand grabbed me by the collar. Another girl stepped from around a corner and said, “Are you some sort of criminal? Why are you trying to sneak *out* of town? Just report that you’re leaving.”
I nearly jumped out of my cloak. “Uh! Febreze Dancer! Nothing! Don’t surprise me like that!”
It was the athletic girls A and B. Nudist Girl from the swim team wasn’t with them, even though she was one of the Four Sports Queens. Since she was the weakest member, was she also the first defeated?
“That’s not her name! And don’t even think about calling us the Twin Telephone Poles.”
They had a fiery glint in their eyes as they glared at something. Did they still have a chip on their shoulder about the nickname the school gave them, the Twin Telephone Poles? To be fair, it was pretty terrible that high school

girls, during such a sensitive period in their lives, were given such a weird nickname.
Wait a second. Were they glaring at me?
“Where’s Nudist Girl?” I asked. “Did she finally get arrested for public indecency?”
“No, we’re actually trying to find her, too. Besides, she wouldn’t get naked in the middle of the town, so she definitely hasn’t been arrested.”
Presence Sense had leveled up enough that I could easily detect all the other girls in town, but I couldn’t tell any of them apart. *Someone is nearby…who is that again?*
“Found her,” I said. “She’s not naked yet, but it looks like she’s ready to tear her clothes off.”
We tracked her to a nearby clothing shop where she was dashing down the aisles, grabbing everything she could. Was there a fire sale or something? So far, she was sensible enough not to get changed in the middle of the store. *So why doesn’t she have enough sense to not take her clothes off in front of a sensitive teenaged boy?*
We entered the shop.
“Nudist Girl,” I called. “Why do you need to buy clothes? You’ll just end up taking them off anyway.”
“Don’t ruin my sterling reputation! I’m not a…nudist,” she responded, apparently flashing back to some past trauma. “I’m wearing…clothes… I’m wearing…”
Maybe she was a repeat offender. Had she been arrested for public indecency before?
“Those clothes look cute though,” I said. “They suit you.”
I wanted to snap her out of whatever dead-eyed depressive mood she was in, but I was also telling the truth—there were some seriously cute clothes in this world. She had two outfits in hand, and both were adorable.
“Y-you r-really mean it? Really? I don’t know…”
Now I saw what was happening. *We got here just in time!* She had found the clothes she wanted to try but the changing rooms must have all been full. She was rushing around in a panic, and she was about to give up and change in front of everyone!
“I think they’re both good,” I said. “Are you having trouble deciding?”
“I can’t afford both outfits, but I really like them and they’re just the right size. I wanted to try them on, but none of the changing rooms are open!”
She knew they fit, but she still wanted to try them on? *I really don’t get girls.*

“Why don’t you just buy them both?” I said. “I can lend you the money. Just agree to a 1000 percent daily interest rate, okay?”
“No one could ever pay that back! Who would ever take a loan from you?!” She shivered. “D-don’t tell me that you want me to pay with my body if I can’t get enough money! I knew you were after my body!”
“I was joking. I’ll lend it to you with no interest.”
“O-of course. W-why…would anyone be interested…in my body…”
Why does she look like she was stabbed in a tragic betrayal?! I gave her a silver coin so she could pay. The other athletic girls rushed to the racks, and I ended up lending them money, too.
I turned to them after they finished paying. “Now I’ll have you pay back your debt with labor!”
“We knew it!” they wailed. “You’re after our bodies! You can’t make us work in a brothel!”
“That wasn’t my plan at all,” I said. “Besides, having Nudist Girl with you makes you suspicious enough, you don’t have to go anywhere near a brothel.”
“Whenever you tell us to not worry about something, I start to worry extra!” protested Nudist Girl. “And I’m *not* a nudist! Look, I’m buying clothes now, aren’t I?”
That made it sound like she’d arrived at the clothing shop naked. It was amazing that no one tried to arrest her then.
I got the four of them to leave town, which was no problem since they had their guild cards. I snuck out behind them, which was no problem since I was being super sneaky.
“How did they not notice you?” shouted the girls as soon as we got away from the gate.
“Uh, couldn’t you tell I was being sneaky?”
“You were literally walking like you always do!”
I needed to search for some more pocket change, preferably a few pockets full of change, or a few buckets. The best method was to instigate a quick goblin massacre.
I spotted a level two goblin—hell yeah!—and began my massacre. My first prey dropped with a thud—*kerplunk*. Its club was only worth a measly 500 ele. I had to find juicier targets; this walking chump change wasn’t even worth testing my new weapons on. *Where are you, sweet pocket change? Kerplunk, kerplunk.*
I want to see what these new weapons do, but these goblins are too weak for me to even tell. (Kerplunk, shaboom, gyaaah!)
I tore a bloody swath through the forest, leaving hardly anything for the Four Sports Queens to fight. At this rate, they’d never be able to pay me back. Still, split between five people, our earnings couldn’t even be called chump change.
Gyaaaargle!

Besides the weak goblins, we only found ultra-low-level howling wolves. They yowled and fell in packs as I continued my massacre.
Awoo—grrch!
The stench of goblin and wolf was pervasive and overwhelming. *Ew, blech.*
The Sylvan Staff had a few open slots, so I stored the Void Staff in it. The Mana Cutter also fused with my staff even though I was way below the minimum required level for it. *It's so loud in here, why do wolves and goblins have to cause such a racket when they die?*
The dead goblins piled up as high as a telephone pole.
I wondered if I could activate the Mana Cutter's effect with my staff. As an experiment, I infused it with some magic and gave an experimental slice in the air. A wave of energy arced blade-like across the length of my staff—now it was *really* slashing like a sword!
I ran through a horde of goblins, cutting them to shreds. Apparently, I could use the Mana Cutter's effect when it was in the Sylvan Staff because the staff itself had no level requirements. The Void Staff's effect didn't seem to do anything, though…
"These goblins are way too puny," I muttered to myself. "Are there any beefier monsters who want to volunteer for an experiment?"
"Hey! Stop talking to yourself! We're trying to kill monsters over here! Besides, those spellstones won't collect themselves!"
What did I do this time? I knew I should've bought that Pheromone Ring. *Never underestimate the importance of sex appeal.* 2.6 million ele was a lot, but maybe I could've haggled it down?
We ended up collecting loot worth a scant 20,000 ele each. *Could I haggle it all the way down to 20,000?*
The monsters were too weak to level anything up at all. The Four Sports Queens were able to pay me back that same day, so they didn't need to sell their bodies at a brothel, either. Not that I had any interest in a place like that. *Does anyone know where I can find one?*

DAY 20
NIGHT
If they tried to kick him out of the library, he'd probably take over the town in order to stay.
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

"HARUKA-KUN IS TRYING to leave by himself," I said.
"Yeah, it seems like he's gearing up to leave"
"Even though all of our problems have disappeared since coming here!"
"Just the opposite," I said. "Everyone seems totally exasperated by Haruka-kun's antics, especially the guild."
"I think Haruka-kun is waiting for Oda-kun and his friends to show up so Shimazaki-san and I can finally thank them!"
"But why?! He's our boss, isn't he?! Why would he leave us?! We still haven't thanked him properly! We still haven't…paid him back…"
Vice Rep B nodded. "Isn't there anything we can do to convince him to stay?"
"I know that my body won't do," whispered Fukunuki-san. "No one wants me…"
"Excuse me." It was the president of the book club. "I do know one way to change his mind…but we don't have it here."
"Tell us!" everyone shouted in unison.
"A library."
"A library?" The room burst into chatter. "There's no library here, right?"
Of course, I should've known. We would need to build a literal library to keep him around… No, he could make the building himself. He'd probably make it absurdly modernist, too.
If he stumbled onto a large volume of books, he'd probably build a library overnight. *Scratch that, definitely.* He'd build St. Peter's Basilica in one night to store those books.
The book club president was right—there was no way he'd leave if there were a library in town. They wouldn't even be able to kick him out if they wanted to. He'd conquer the town if it meant he could hole up with books.
He's been obsessed with books for as long as I've known him—eleven years. They're all he's ever wanted.
He'd saved us so many times. Everything that we had in this world, we owed to him, including our lives. But we hadn't done anything in return. There was no way to make it up to him.

We would probably keep talking about it all night, trying to figure out what to do. Someone would probably burst into tears, unable to bear it anymore. The discussions wouldn't stop, we'd just keep going.
No matter where the conversation went, it always wrapped back around to that subject.
"If Haruka-kun goes back to the cave, it will probably be to stop the other guys from reaching town," I said. "Since he's worried about all of us, Oda-kun, and his friends, he'll probably make his stand there. He doesn't want anyone to get killed, or to kill anyone himself, so he'll probably try to do everything alone…" I trailed off. "But no matter how strong he is, he can't ignore the level wall. Even if he is stronger than all of them, he can still be defeated. He might even die. Even knowing that, he's still trying to do everything himself. He only seems stronger than everyone else. He is actually weaker, more vulnerable. He's the real one in danger here."
Since I confiscated his money, he wouldn't be able to leave quite yet.
Until that day comes…

DAY 21
MORNING
I sit and eat breakfast alone.
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

IT WAS MY FIRST BREAKFAST alone in a long time.

Not that that made me a loner! There was just no one else there. They just abandoned me! This was their way of bullying me. *Well, not necessarily, but they might as well be bullies, right?*

Since the girls were proper adventurers, they had work in the morning. As a member of the noble unemployed class, I ate breakfast alone.

There's nothing wrong with this! We were just behaving as expected for our respective professions. No need to insult me! Read the room!

The room was empty…

The girls were adventurers, so they formed parties and went on quests. I wasn't allowed to be an adventurer, so I sat and ate breakfast by myself.

See! Considering everyone's individual specialties, we were all doing the activities we were best suited for!

The girls were adventurers, so they took on quests. I was a shut-in, so I stayed inside and ate breakfast alone.

That verifies that this is perfectly acceptable, I thought. The mere act of eating breakfast had clarified my place in the grand scheme of things. My titles had cursed me to this existence.

Everyone is probably talking about me behind my back, I thought, even the villagers.

At that moment, my breakfast arrived. Woo-hoo! Eggs! Sunny side up, no less!

They were surprisingly expensive. Maybe I should get my own chicken? If I built a chicken coop in my cave, then I could have a supply of eggs, and meat, too.

The two old guys and the four gorgeous girls were showing my classmates the ropes, which is why everyone had left so early.

Each party had one leader and a maximum of five other members. All of them together formed four parties. That was enough for a genuine expedition. How many parties needed to travel together before they had to register as a mercenary company? *Were there mercenary companies in this world?*

The girls were stronger than me, but they were inexperienced and relied too much on their cheat skills. The old guys would probably show them how to fight without falling back on a few overpowered abilities. They'd learn the practical skills all adventurers needed to survive… *I wish I could be there! Taught by a hot elf…*

The girls were finally living and working as adventurers. They'd take quests five times a week, aiming to make 250,000 ele per month. According to the Class Rep's calculations, that was roughly equal to 500,000 yen. *An impressive salary for their first jobs…*

It sounded like a lot, but when you consider the cost of lodging, food, and bath access, that totaled about 150,000 ele per month. That only left 100,000 ele in the budget for weapons, equipment, consumables, emergency funds, and snacks. If they had anything left after all that, they'd need to spend it on other daily necessities and clothes. It was a tight budget. 500,000 ele a month would have given them money to spare, but given how weak the local monsters were, it was impossible to make good cash. Despite all these challenges, they were all trying so hard to make it in this town. They were willing to do whatever it took.

Meanwhile, I was turning into a total freeloader because of them. Was this a new bullying technique? I was truly meant for the forest hermit life, with its all-you-can-kill goblins and all-you-can-pick mushrooms!

If I took the shortest possible route back to the cave and slew monsters along the way, the trip would take two days. That's not accounting for the return trip.

Going to the cave, hunting monsters, and selling the goods in town was a good plan aside from that. I could even skip paying rent by sleeping in the woods.

Right now, the girls were split into four teams. They could set up a rotation system, where at any given time, half of them were selling loot in town and the other half were camping in the woods and grinding for spellstones. That way, they could cut lodging expenses in half and live easily.

In that case, someone would need to be permanently stationed at the cave. None of the girls wanted to live that forest life. It seemed that forest gals were a myth here—this was a hermit-exclusive fantasy world. *Don't call them shut-ins or NEETS, damn it!* As a loner, I was comfortable with solitude. *This is how I must live.*

If someone dropped by my cave twice a week, we could exchange goods and spellstones. Besides, I could always visit town with them if I felt like it. Since I couldn't join the guild, staying in town felt pointless.

It was simply the most efficient and effective choice, both in terms of mushroom hunting and in terms of survival.

And that's why…one day, I'll die alone in the forest, I thought.

Not like town was any better—I was just as likely to get murdered here.

I would die alone. No one would mourn for me. No one would even know.

The thought worried me. Frightened me. The girls were probably worried about it, too.

Did the Class Rep confiscate my money to keep me from leaving?

DAY 21
MORNING
Oh yeah, of course, Omui, it's like sooo famous.
OMUI GUILD

NOTHING IN MY LIFE made sense. I wasn't an Adventurer, but I stopped by the guild every day like I was employed. I was supposedly a shut-in, but I wasn't allowed to go back home. I even somehow ended up being a loner who was constantly being reprimanded by twenty teenage girls. *None of my titles fit! So why won't they change?!*

I leaned on the receptionist's counter and said, "Do you folks really not have any jobs that are, like, get-rich-quick schemes?"

"You just made eight *million* ele the other day, spent every last penny, and you want a get-rich-quick scheme *now*? How much money do you need? Twenty million? A hundred million? *There's no such job!"*

I didn't get glares all morning because the girls left so early. But I was not to be disappointed; the glares were out in force thanks to the receptionist. If the Class Rep was the Queen of Glares, did that make the receptionist the Countess of Glares?

The quality and quantity of glares were the real evidence that this was a fantasy world. Normal people in the real world couldn't glare that much.

Why are there no good jobs? This place felt so desolate, no one was even trying to pick a fight with me. Was Omui suffering an economic depression? With the lack of good jobs, were we even on the way to a monster shortage?

"The list hasn't even changed since yesterday," I remarked. "What's the point of looking? Who's responsible for posting the bulletin? They're not doing their job! The injustice of the system is turning me into Jean Valjean! Stand back, I'm going to steal some bread! Where are the silver candlesticks? Can you give them to me?!"

"Why would you want silver candlesticks, and why would I give them to you? Is this your attempt to sneakily ask for work under the table? It would be so much easier to look the other way if you tried being subtle for once!"

Well, that was my fill of glares for the day. Without my daily dose of glares, I would be plunged into a world of utter darkness… *To receive a glare was to notice a beam of light flickering on the darkening horizon; it was to know hope.* Was she still mad at me?

The girls probably wouldn't get back until evening, maybe not until night, since they were getting proper training. Akemi-san said she worked at night too, didn't she? *Where did she say she worked? Teenage boys need money!*

I knew that mushrooms were a rare and expensive commodity. Could my wild surplus meet local demand? Either way, I was proud of my little mushrooms, finally proving their worth.

Of course, I had myriad reasons not to sell all of them. They were medicine, food, and money all in one. I needed to give the girls a few mushrooms, too. For adventurers based in town, mushrooms were as good as gold. My little mushrooms made me feel safe.

The general store was willing to buy stamina and mana mushrooms for 50,000 ele each. That was actually what I could get for the lowest grade of mushrooms I had. The store couldn't pay me in ele, so I bartered for a minor Bag of Holding. It was a rare item with a price of 100,000 ele. For how much it cost, it was way worse than my Bag of Holding. It had limited capacity and couldn't store any large objects. Still, it was a valued part of any modern adventurer's kit. I bought out their entire stock for the girls.

Now this is how adults do their shopping! So what if I paid by bartering mushrooms?

I crammed the bags with mushrooms and canteens of limitless fruit juice. That would help keep them safe. The Class Rep had that emergency supply of spellstones, too.

This otherwise seemed like the right time for me to return to my cave, but the nerds had yet to return to Omui. Where in the world were they nerding around? They told me that they'd wait here in town!

I was out of options. Waiting was too boring. I had to think like the Queen Bee and go nerd hunting.

That would be fastest, wouldn't it? I knew they were nerding around somewhere nearby.

I left a message for the girls at the inn. Only two roads led out from this town. I didn't know which road they took, but they were definitely nerding along one of them. *Let's go nerd hunting! Their nerding days are numbered!*

I followed the road leading downriver first.

I crept through the town gates behind a merchant. All I had to do was go for an air walk and drop down if I saw anything shaped like a nerd. *Another flawless plan!*

Whether I was running, sprinting, or bounding, I sped down the road. My first flight attempt didn't work. I went too fast; the ground became an indistinct blur. Nerd hunting was impossible if I couldn't see. I still hadn't figured out how to land without hurting myself—if anyone saw me, they would've said I plummeted! Even if my clothes didn't rip, it still hurt a lot.

I stuck to the ground instead, jetting forward at high speed. *I could get to my cave in less than a day at this rate,* I thought, *and if I fly, I can do a round trip in a day!* It would hurt like hell, but it would be worth it.

So far, I had destroyed thirty goblins who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Foolish goblins. *Keep clear of my landing zone! Goblins are so inconsiderate.* The way those goblins cluelessly bumbled along, totally unaware of anyone else, I almost mistook them for the nerds.

I passed some other villages, horse-drawn carriages, and bandit gangs, but I didn't sense the presence of the nerds, so I kept going.

I was about to pass by a horse-drawn carriage getting attacked by bandits, but the bandits noticed and surrounded me.
“Hey, let’s kill that ugly kid! We can’t leave no witnesses!”
“Excuse me?” I roared. “FIRE WALLOP! Burn! Burn! Burn! Burn! Burn!” I chanted “Burn!” over and over as I let loose multiple salvos of flame bullets.
I’d really needed that stress relief. When I feel stressed, I need to take care to blow off steam before the pressure builds up to the bursting point. Incinerating some rude bandits was the ultimate way to mellow out.
“D-damn you…”
I said, “Oh, you’re still in one piece? Was that not enough fire? I must’ve gone too easy on you.”
“This kid a mage or somethin’? Hell, we’ve got magic-resistant gear equipped an’ everything… What’s going on?!”
Huh? Some of the bandits approached me. Was the heat not high enough? According to my recipe, they should’ve been burnt to a crisp. *I’ll have to adjust the cook time whenever I substitute bandits for goblins.*
The bandits, charred and crispy, surrounded me. *Hey, you’re not the nerds I’m looking for! Ugh.* Now I was surrounded by a bunch of old dudes *yet again.* Why am I always surrounded by old men?
“Are you stupid? How would I know what’s going on?! I don’t know why your magic gear didn’t work! Ask the guy who sold you that crap! Do I look like a magic equipment traveling salesman to you?! You’re asking the wrong person for a refund! You think I’ll just be like, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, sir, please enjoy this complimentary magic armor for your trouble?!’ Of course not! I ain’t selling!”
“Shut up already, you stupid brat!”
Huh? But he was the one who asked me, why is he telling me to shut up?
Did he not know anything about the etiquette of conversation? Not to brag or anything, but the Class Rep told me that I’m an unruly devil when it came to conversation. *Wait a second, is that not a compliment?*
“Close in on the mage! He’s only got a staff, let’s get in his face and beat him dead ’fore he casts any other spells!”
They were going for melee combat, but why tell me? They screamed and roared as I easily dodged their attacks.
“You’re not a mage?!”
“Huh? No, I’m a NEET!”
“Huh?”
“What?”
Don’t “huh” me like that! I answered your damn question! Hold on, are you trying to shame me for being unemployed? What a cheap shot. That hurt my feelings!
My heart received considerable damage. A bitter blow.
“Hey, the brat’s only level 9? Let’s use weapon techniques!” one of the bandits yelled.
“He’s a weakling! End him already!” another responded.

They saw through my Stealth. What a pain. One of them must have had Skill-proof Detection. *Weapon skills, huh?* I'd probably die if I got hit.
They unleashed an endless combo, shouting each attack name at the tops of their lungs: "Slash! Double Slash! Bash! Mighty Swing! Crushing Blow! Thrust! Rolling Slash!"
Eventually, they ran out of steam and were left panting on the ground. Of course you're going to be tired if you keep screaming the attack names. What idiots.
Soaked in sweat, they breathed with heavy, groaning gasps.
Were they that out of shape? A bandit needs to stay fit and active! Every bandit should practice my morning calisthenics routine! I thought. Nothing can be done for their lack of brains, though.
The Evasion Cloak effect seemed to be working pretty well; I definitely felt the benefits of "Speed +20%, Evasion bonus (small)." Their techniques looked impressive, but they moved like they were underwater. They were way slower than any kobold. Even though they were as big and ugly as orcs, they fought no better than level 5 goblins.
Huh? They collapsed, blue in the face. Was this oxygen deprivation? *Even uglier than before! Even orcs would shudder.*
"I apologize for the inconvenience," I said. "But the present bandits have been defeated. Maybe they defeated themselves? They've collapsed. Thank you for your efforts in defeating the bandit menace, bandits."
A soldier who was fighting near the carriage said, "Milady, their weapons were tipped with poison, judging from this wound…"
I gave the soldier some antidotes. Even though he had just gotten grazed, they didn't seem like they did anything. Were those herbs I used to make them really just a bunch of weeds? Was I wasting my time weeding the forest?!
The level wall is a real problem, I thought. Their weapon techniques were nothing special, but they were honed, fast, and powerful. The users may have been slow, but the weapon techniques allowed them to fight with way more speed and strength.
Were the weapon techniques originally developed as an aerobics routine? It looked like nothing more than a bunch of shouts and vigorous movements. The bandits clearly didn't do enough sets. *That's what they were missing, they needed a drill sergeant! Someone who could really push them!* I had to tell the Class Rep about this as soon as I got back. She could definitely start a fitness program based on weapon techniques.
Maybe that would make up for not buying enough souvenirs. They ate all the dried fruit! How could they eat so much dried fruit in one night?! On second thought, I don't want to know.
Oh. Some girl sitting in the carriage was talking to me: "Hello? Hello? Are you listening to me?"
"Are you injured?" I asked. "I have some suspicious mushroom juice, do you want some?"

She looked baffled. Did she not want any? *I don't blame her.* It reeked of mold.
The soldier tied up the bandit gang. It seemed like he was fully recovered from the poison. That meant the antidotes weren't just weeds after all. I proclaimed with a stupid grin on my face that they were real antidotal herbs after all. I really was relieved. The soldiers ate all the antidotal herbs and stamina mushrooms that I handed out. No one even complained about the mushroom stink.
"Hello? Please listen to me! Do you not understand what I'm saying?"
Apparently the girl had exited the carriage to talk to me.
"I am Merielle Sim Omui, the daughter of the duke of Omui. Can you hear me? I've had to introduce myself five times already! I feel like I'm going to cry."
"Yeah, yeah, I can hear you fine. I was totally paying attention. My name's Haruka. Nice to meet you…Merimeri-san?"
I really was listening, my memory was just full of holes. Did she say she was from Omui City? She was the duke's daughter, a noble girl. *I can't believe it took me three whole weeks in a fantasy world to meet a noble girl!* At this rate, I wouldn't meet a legit princess for fifty years. By that point, she'd have shriveled up into an old spinster!
"T-that's not my name! I'll cry! I'll wail! I'll flood the world with my tears! I'll drown in that sea of tears because of you! Why don't you listen to anything I say? My name's not Merimeri!"
The noble girl kept talking about something that I couldn't understand.

“Haruka-sama,” said the soldier. “We are currently en route to Omui. Would you do us the honor of joining us? I want to thank you again for your help, as an escort myself…”
“Uh, sure, but only if we’re close? I kind of want to get back to town by nightfall.”
“Haruka-sama, what town do you hail from?”
“Uh…you know, the one upriver? Uh…does it have a name?”
For some reason Merimeri started bawling. “Oh yes, I’m just the daughter of a nameless duke of a nameless city in a nameless land. I’m so sorry that I thought my family deserved a name. Just call me Merimeri, since I deserve nothing more…”
For some reason, the soldiers kept admonishing me on the way into town. The gatekeeper took over scolding duty when we got back to town. To be fair, I *did* sneak out, but the gatekeeper eventually sighed and waived my entry fee because of my present company.
“Oh yeah, of course, Ommi, it’s like *sooo* famous, everyone knows it! Everyone loves it, even wild goblins were talking about the town of Ennui!”
I was trying to make things right in the carriage. I wasn’t sure, but I definitely forgot the name of the town two more times, not to mention Merimeri’s name. *It’s hard not remembering things.*
“What do you mean—were goblins really talking about it?! That can only mean that they plan on attacking my town!” Merimeri’s waterworks started up again. Tears traced little rivulet patterns on her cheeks. “But there’s no hope for the town, is there? It’s Omui, a tiny backwater unworthy of even having a name…”
When the Class Rep heard that I made the daughter of the duke cry, she got mad at me, too. The scolding intensified when she found out that I snuck out of town. It reached a fever pitch when she heard the message I left at the inn: “Out nerd-hunting.”
Trying to smooth things over, I said “But I didn’t even end up hunting them, what’s the big deal?”
I just couldn’t keep up. She was beyond furious when I said that.
Then, the soldier told her all about how I fought off a gang of high-level bandits who used weapon skills. Her anger turned to tears. *Today is the day of angry tears, I guess.*

DAY 21
NIGHT
Weapon techniques make for an amazing weight-loss routine. One more set!
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

I SAW THE NOBLE GIRL—*Meri…meri?* Whatever her name was—off to her estate, and they told me they'd send a messenger for me later.
The Class Rep's rage never abated, but she did stop crying.
"But can't you see? Everything was fine! It doesn't matter how cool the prizes are if they can't hit me! Know what I mean?" Why was I thinking of a red comet?
"What prizes? What prize would they have gotten if they hit you?! A packet of tissues? Why would you do something so dangerous?!"
"I'm telling you, I know how to deal with weapon techniques. It's fine."
I proceeded to explain the fatal flaw and dire side effects of using weapon techniques to the Class Rep.
"Using a weapon technique makes you do extreme aerobics while shouting at the top of your lungs, which tires you out really fast. It looked like a great way to slim down! Like a dynamic routine with a drill-sergeant-type shouting something like 'Come on! One more set!'"
"Why are you trying to channel the spirit of a drill instructor? Are you trying to start a calisthenics boot camp or something? We're exercising every day; we're fine!"
Apparently the girls were in good shape. *At ease!*
Even defeating those bandits didn't give me a level. Looking at how the girls leveled, it seemed like hitting 10th, 20th, and 30th level was more difficult than normal. Even with experience-boosting skills, crossing those thresholds was difficult. It was almost impossible for regular people to reach them. Which meant that someone like me had absolutely no hope! *Yeah, as far as I'm concerned, leveling up has become pointless!* Looking at my skills, they pretty much resembled those of a Sage.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 09
JOB: —
HP: 120
MP: 122
VIT: 118
POW: 117
SPE: 118

DEX: 116
MIN: 130
INT: 134
LUK: Max (Above Limit)
SP: 177
COMBAT SKILLS: Cane Mastery Lv7, Evasion Lv6, Foresight Lv6, Magic Infusion Lv6
MAGIC: Heat Lv4, Movement Lv6, Weight Lv6, Packing Lv6, Four Elements Lv5, Wood Lv4, Lightning Lv3, Ice Lv3
SKILLS: General Health Lv4, Sensitivity Lv4, Calisthenics Lv5, Walking Lv6, Servitude Lv4, Appraisal Lv6, Clairvoyance Lv6, Presence Detection Lv7, Enemy Tracking Lv7, Magic Manipulation Lv6, Presence Concealment Lv5, Stealth Lv6, Hiding Lv6, Map Lv5, Focus Lv6, Physics Resistance Lv6, MP Regeneration Lv6, Stamina Regeneration Lv6, Parallel Thinking Lv4, Serial Thinking Lv4, Dash Lv2, Airwalk Lv2, Overclock Lv1, High-Speed Thinking Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv4, NEET Lv4, Loner Lv4, Sorcerer Lv5
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv3, Master of None Lv3, Blockhead Lv3
EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Bag of Holding, Monster Bracelet Power +1% Speed +1%, Black Hat

I went to the guild every day, but NEET kept leveling up anyway. It was now up to level 4. *Does visiting the guild not count as work?*
What was I supposed to do?! I can't get a job, so it's just going to keep going up, right?
I had some new skills, too, Overclock and High-Speed Thinking. *Sounds fast.*
Getting faster was good, but I didn't want to be the kind of guy who went too fast and, uh…finished prematurely. I had enough to worry about in that department with Sensitivity leveling up in the background! I couldn't verify whether I was actually getting more sensitive since I lacked the time and privacy needed to try out…certain teenage boy activities. I didn't have a partner to test Sensitivity out with, either. I was beginning to lose all hope of ever being able to have those experiences. *I need to figure out where Akemi works,* I thought. *Surely that was the kind of place where teenage boys could make important personal discoveries, right?*

DAY 21
NIGHT
♦
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR
INTERLUDE:
GIRLS' MEETING

TONIGHT'S MEETING focused on our daily training, combat practice, and our current situation. We shared our thoughts and feelings. Eventually, the conversation turned to the Haruka-kun situation and what we could do about it.

He finally did it. He got into a fight with high-level bandits that apparently used weapon techniques against him. I say "apparently" because he came back without a scratch on him.

If he took even one hit, he could have died. He insisted they were too slow to win any prizes, but was I really okay with that? I didn't even know what he meant.

In the end, he came back alive and told me everything was okay. I couldn't help but worry. How long would he be able to survive? He could be gone tomorrow.

He assured me that he was just passing by and ended up getting surrounded by bandits. That was an obvious lie.

If he was really sprinting by at full speed, he couldn't have gotten dragged into a fight. In all likelihood, he threw himself into the fray to help people. As fast as he could move, there was no way he could've gotten ambushed.

He always put up a facade of indifference, irritation, and reluctance, but he always helped when it mattered.

That's what he did for Oda-kun and his friends, for Shimazaki-san and her friends, and even for me. Every single time, he pretended that his help was just a matter of happenstance.

"Are we going to run surveillance on him?" Vice Rep B asked.

"Tie him up?" Vice Rep A said with a smirk.

"Use some tape?" Shimazaki-san suggested.

"Bondage?" Fukunuki-san offered with a glint in her eyes.

Everyone kept throwing out suggestions. Did any of us have tape? *No, keep thinking.*

In the end, I knew it would be impossible to keep him here. We could stand by, protect, surveil, stalk, smother, bind, and even imprison him. But we wouldn't, we couldn't, and we shouldn't. I couldn't just do nothing and let him go, though.

He wouldn't change even if we asked. *None of us want him to, either.*

DAY 22
MORNING
Was this some sort of mushroom disease or a fungal infection?
Did she eat some poison mushrooms?
GENERAL STORE

WHAT A LAMENTABLE TRAGEDY! I underestimated this world. I assumed it was a simplistic fantasy world. I thought it was all a big joke. I couldn't believe that things would come to this. My name should go down as the definition of folly.
I kicked open the door to the general store and stomped inside.
"I know what you're hiding!" I roared. "Show me! Show it to me *now*! Where is it?! You've been lying to me all along, but if you tell me the truth now, I'll spare you!"
"Oh? Is there something I can help you with?" The general store worker glanced around. "Can anyone come help this poor youth? He must have gone mad!" she shouted out the rapidly shutting door.
The general store lady didn't quite grasp the seriousness of the matter at hand.
"The soy sauce!" I bellowed. "What else would I be talking about, dumbass?! Give me soy sauce! Now! Please and thank you! The regular kind! Just give it to me!"
"What sauce…?"
"You can't hide it from me!" I howled. "The girl from the Lady Finger Boudoir confessed everything! Tears rolled down her cheeks as she told me all about where the sauce came from. The inn purchased that salty elixir *here*!"
"Soy sauce? Oh, that salty, fermented sauce?" Her left eyelid twitched in agitation. "Just what did you do to that poor girl?!"
How dare she get mad at me! Everyone intentionally concealed the truth from me this whole time. This world had *soy sauce*! This was the essence of this world, the cosmic truth, the holy writ! *Soy sauce!*
"When I was here before, I asked that you show me the seasonings, and yet you hid the soy sauce! Is that not so?! Do you deny that you had it?! Lies! You concealer of soy sauce, you *dare* to deny it!"
"We just got the shipment in yesterday! We weren't hiding the sauce from you. It's rare and it sells terribly, so we rarely order it. Why are you losing your mind about this?!"
Soy sauce doesn't sell well? Do my ears deceive me? We are *talking about soy sauce, aren't we?* I didn't understand. *Maybe the benighted denizens of a fantasy world don't yet comprehend how marvelous it is.* They didn't know

to appreciate the beauty of soy sauce. Could this world be so contemptible and barbaric? Whatever monster ruined soy sauce's good reputation would have hell to pay…
Besides, if it was so unpopular, how did it sell out in the first place? There was something suspicious about all this!
"Give me all of it," I demanded. "Sell it to me. Now. Faster!"
She stopped and crossed her arms. "Not until you've calmed down," she said. "I'm worried about you. The other day you were a normal, polite kid. You've totally changed."
"My precious *soy sauce*! Soy sauce, soy sauce, soy sauce! I want it, I need it! Must have the soy sauce!"
What am I even saying?
"I-I would be happy to sell you some. Sure. We have two massive barrels brimming with the stuff. How much do you want?"
"I'll take it all! I'll pay with mushrooms!"
My bag was still flooded with fungus.
"Mushrooms?" Her jaw dropped. "Where? Give them to me! Hurry! Mushrooms, you fool, the noble fungus! Mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms! *Give me the mushrooms!"*
Did she lose her mind? Was this some sort of mushroom disease or a fungal infection? Did she eat some poison mushrooms?
The lady—the, er, young lady who worked here emptied the register to buy as many mushrooms as she could.
I was able to afford all of the soy sauce. To test it out, I dehydrated some mushrooms with Heat Magic, glazed them with soy sauce, and roasted them using Fire Magic.
I couldn't get enough of the smell! I passed a skewer to the general store lady, and she was overwhelmed with joy after one bite. Other fantasy world food paled in comparison.
"Sell me back some soy sauce!" she demanded.
Her eyes had been opened to the true beauty of soy sauce. I poured some sauce into individual bottles and sold it back to her at a massive markup. She wiped a tear from her eye.
She apparently pulled an all-nighter sorting the mushrooms and preparing them for sale. She made back all the money she spent and more in a single day. *Talk about greedy.* I was worried that she might start demanding more mushrooms every day. Wasn't the local merchant supposed to live in humble frugality and walk a simple path toward a decent, honorable life? Apparently, she didn't play by those rules.
Anyway, you should have seen her face when I told her I had more mushrooms to sell her if she could get me some rice.

DAY 22
MORNING
I wanted to work at the public library, but they only care about themselves!
OMUI GUILD

AS USUAL, everyone avoided looking at me when I entered the guildhall. I'd heard a pretty wild rumor that adventurers were at increased risk of spraining their necks nowadays. *Is this why?*

"Why haven't the listings updated?" I asked. "I come here every day to check."

"Why do you come every day to check?" the receptionist responded. "You're not an adventurer."

Her long sigh came with a free side order of glaring. She really knew how to mix things up.

I considered looking for the nerds again today, but when I thought back to yesterday and how upset the girls were, I decided against it. Their rebukes made no sense, to be honest. I was totally unharmed, while the thieves went blue in the face trying to fight me and knocked themselves out. As usual, I did nothing wrong, yet everyone still got mad at me. *This world is truly inexplicable,* I thought.

I wanted to make some money, but there were no good jobs. I hadn't found one this entire time.

50,000 ele per day was just heartless and cruel. At that rate, I'd never be able to buy my sex appeal…

"You know," I said to the receptionist, "it doesn't need to be a job. I just want some way to make money."

"The Adventurers' Guild can't help you with that. You're not even a licensed adventurer in the first place," she snapped. "From what I've heard, you've emptied the coffers not just from here, but at the armory and the general store, too. Where did all that money disappear to? How do you end up broke at the end of every day? Are you planning to con every business in this town out of all their savings?"

Omui apparently faced a serious cash shortage. There wasn't enough currency in circulation; that's why they blamed me whenever I sold them goods. Was I summoned to this world to solve the out-of-control deflation crisis? *That's not what we were told, but it's possible, isn't it?*

There were no jobs outside the town. Staying in town cost me money I didn't have, though. Everyone would worry if I left, but I was so broke that I couldn't stay. I couldn't even enjoy window shopping since I couldn't buy anything. *Goblin hunting's the best option left.*

As I tried to sneak my way out of town, the soldier from yesterday spotted me on his patrol.
“Excuse me, why are you leaving town? I told you that a messenger would be sent for you! You were nowhere to be found this morning, and now I find you creeping toward the town gate?”
I ran from him as best I could, ducking into alleyways and sneaking along rooftops, until a cute maid called out to me from the street. I stopped to chat and before I knew it, she took me to the duke’s mansion, where some noble girl rebuked me all over again.
“Wouldn’t you try to escape if some total stranger just started calling out to you?” I protested. “I didn’t know *he’d* be the messenger! And I didn’t know you’d send for me the next day!”
“In that case, why did you obediently follow a cute maid who you had never even seen before?” the girl chastised. “Did you forget everything? When you saw me today, you looked like you didn’t even remember who I was. Are you suffering from short-term memory loss?”
Was she mad at me or not?
“It’s been so long,” I said, chuckling. “I almost didn’t recognize you. You’ve grown so much since we last met.” *I’m so smooth.*
“We only just met yesterday! How could I have possibly grown? Are you telling me I look fat today? Your blank face tells me that’s not it. You were just making small talk like you would with an old acquaintance you didn’t recognize. You can’t even remember what happened yesterday, can you?! Am I that unremarkable? Do you even remember my name? Should I even ask if you remember the name of this town?”
We met yesterday, apparently. I focused on my memory as best I could, hoping the right synapses would fire in my brain. *Let’s try this!*
“Of *course*, I haven’t forgotten you,” I proclaimed. “How could I ever forget you? Seasons pass, years go by, but I would never forget anything about you…Merimeri-san?”
“You remembered the *wrong* name!” she shrieked. “You’re putting on airs like you know what’s going on, but you have no clue at all! Never mind years, you can’t even remember things that happened seconds ago!”
I think she’s mad at me. Interrupting her shouts, the duke’s servants brought out plates of food and set them on a table. *Standard hospitality for a mansion, I guess?*
“I wanted to thank you by preparing lunch for you,” she shouted. “It’s not much, but I also wanted to give you a token of my appreciation. Why am I still so irritated?!”
I shrugged. “You’re asking the wrong person, lady. Who knows what got under your skin?”
Yesterday she was dressed in simple traveler’s clothes, but today she was stamping her feet in a beautiful, bespoke dress. *Is this some sort of fashionable courtly dance?* “May I have this dance, milady, this stomping of the feet?” *Being an aristocrat ain’t easy.*

“Ugh! Pardon me. It’s the least I could do, but please accept this reward for your services. Yesterday you mentioned that you lacked identification papers, so I prepared these for your use.” A maid—the same one who lured me here—presented a tray holding a card embossed with text.
The noble girl continued, “It’s a pass that exempts you from the entry fee. The name of the town, Omui, is engraved on the card, so please remember. *Omui.* That is the name of the town as well as my surname. I also have a given name. My full name, Merielle Sim Omui, is also written on this card. Please erase Merimeri from your memory altogether.”
The food was so delicious that I stopped focusing on the conversation… What was she talking about? I nodded when she paused.
“My father, the duke, wanted to express his gratitude as well, but he is out on a diplomatic visit to a neighboring town with my mother. He wanted to apologize for being unable to thank you in person. After hearing of my rescue, he gave an order to increase the size of the sign in front of our town that reads ‘Omui.’ He ordered that the text be legible from leagues away. We also plan to hang banners throughout the town that say ‘Welcome to Omui.’ In addition, we are preparing one hundred road signs that point the way to Omui. The officials in the department of tourism are also discussing the possibility of commissioning an anthem for Omui to be played at a loud volume throughout the town.”
I guess government officials like to waste money in all worlds, I thought. *There’s no end to the ridiculousness.* Back in the real world, I wanted to work at the public library. I wanted to waste money in self-serving ways too! I just wanted to buy books I liked with public money and read them all! If these people thought that making a theme song for a town was a good idea, why couldn’t I treat a public library as a personal bookshelf? Government officials and bureaucrats never listen to *reason*. *Huh?* The noble girl was still talking.
“Hello? Why do you never listen to me when I’m speaking? Are you ignoring me on purpose? Do you have ears? Do they function? Why won’t you listen? Why won’t you remember my name?”
I couldn’t figure out what she was talking about. I was totally listening when it sounded important.
“I made sure to present myself in the best possible fashion, and you still treated me like a nobody!”
The butler gave me a dirty look. I wish the cute maid would look at me like that.

DAY 22
AFTERNOON
If there's no information on home delivery, then I couldn't care less.
THE HIGHWAY

I GOT MY TRAVEL PASS, which doubled as an I.D. It even said "Haruka" on it. Merimeri's full name was written down as the guarantor. I could come and go as I pleased, free of charge. Just for the heck of it, I left and re-entered about eight times before the gatekeeper started yelling at me.

Ugh, I don't feel like going back to town, so let's go nerd-hunting, I thought. The other road led away from the river—and the fish—but I had to explore that way anyway. I'll come back for my precious fish later.

According to Meri…meri-san, her father was visiting a town along this road. At least, that's what I remembered her saying. If the duke was there, then the nerds could be there, too.

After a minute of walking, I broke into a sprint. *I feel way faster*. Last night, I had stored the "Speed Bonus Boots: Speed +30%. Hyper-speed" in an open slot in my leather boots, so maybe that helped, but I couldn't say for certain.

I'd left town only moments before, but I felt like I was covering a ton of ground. My thoughts about the officials were entirely uncalled for. The signs really were a necessary improvement. They even listed the distance to the next town. I didn't know how fast I was running, but I doubted that there was any sort of speed limit.

I glimpsed a sign that said, "Traffic Warning: Injury Can Derail Your Life." *Seriously?* Their warning took long enough to read that I caused an accident trying to read it! There were squishy goblins in the way. Far from minor injury, the goblins were knocked dead! *Don't make useless signs—evacuate the goblins away from main roads!* Constantly crashing into goblins was starting to hurt. I was sick of them! They kept popping out, brandishing their clubs.

The signs weren't enough; even Presence Detection and Enemy Tracking didn't help me avoid these goblins. The road looked like the aftermath of a war zone behind me! Broken goblin bodies were scattered everywhere in my wake.

What am I trying to do in the first place? I thought. Was I planning on colliding with the nerds, sending them into low fantasy-world orbit?

I saw another besieged carriage on the road ahead. This must be what all the cool kids are doing nowadays. Should I attack some carriages, too? I just want to see what all the hype is about.

As I drew near, I read the word “OMUI” written in massive letters on the side of the carriage. Was that the name of a company? *Could it be…a delivery company?!* If I befriended the delivery driver, I could ask them to deliver me some books!

The assailant was an armed soldier. Fighting him was another armed soldier. Fantasy world delivery must be perilous stuff. All these bandits definitely cause delays.

In any case, I knocked the assailant away. Rather, I crashed into him, sending him flying like so many goblins. Traffic was a serious problem in this world.

A stranger approached me, “Are you Haruka-kun, by any chance?”

Huh? I wasn’t expecting any deliveries. The stranger was another old man, but he wasn’t holding a package. What was up with the ratio of old men in this world? Light novels promised me that fantasy worlds were full of giggling, beautiful girls who surrounded you everywhere you went. Why was I constantly surrounded by geezers? Friend or foe, they all had their old man status in common! *Is this world trying to murder me with old-man stench?!*

“Uh, yeah, that’s me. You’re a courier, right? Where do I sign?”

“Do you not see the name written in giant letters on the side of this carriage? I recognized you from the reports I received: a kid with dark hair and eyes who crashes into enemies at high speeds. Didn’t you receive an invitation from my daughter this morning?”

Then who was going to deliver my books? Couldn’t anyone go to Amazon and get some books for me? Was this all part of a delivery scam?

“Your daughter? Oh, you must be Merimeri-san’s dad. You’re the duke of that unnamed town, right?”

The other old guys started to close in on me, their hands going to their weapons. A chill swept through the air as I dropped the ambient temperature with Heat Magic. Then, I froze their legs in place with Ice Magic. Crackling ice climbed their armored boots.

Hmm, y’know, I’ve always wanted to try out Flame Whorl… For all I knew, these guys were wanted criminals or creeps who preyed on kids. Better use it now just in case.

With a flick of my wrist, their weapons, hands, and hair all burst into flame. *Go bald, old men!* They were charged with the crime of attempting to suffocate me with their old-man stench.

As the flames dissipated before me, I saw a bunch of scalded, bald old men barely holding on to dear life, legs frozen in place. I assumed that Flame Whorl would be…I don’t know, cool-looking. This was just a bunch of sad old men with scorched scalps.

I didn’t ask for this! I meant to summon a raging maelstrom of fire! *Why did I wish baldness upon them? I’ve created a Hair Whorl!*

The old man who talked to me before had been shouting something this entire time.

“Pardon me, could you please listen to me?! Reports warned me that you tend to ignore people, but could you please stop attacking my soldiers and listen? I’m tired of talking to myself! The soldiers you burned look rather upset—you ought to have at least challenged them to a proper duel before attacking! And my town has a name! This name!” The duke emphatically pointed at the side of the carriage. “Furthermore, my proper title is not ‘Merimeri-san’s Dad!’ Allow me to have the honor of introducing myself! No more spells! If you don’t stop, I will tell my daughter that you called her Merimeri-san again! She’ll become distraught, and it will be all your fault!”
I finished subduing all of the newly bald men. They could barely stand, so I gave them some mushroom potions. It healed their injuries but not their baldness. *I’m never using Hair Whorl again! That skill is terror beyond my worst nightmares!*
Why was it that every time I went hunting for nerds, I ran into goblins and geezers instead? Could Presence Detection not differentiate between nerds, goblins, and old men?
An older woman wearing a beautiful gown said, “Haruka-kun, I must thank you. You have now saved the lives of both my husband and my daughter.” She was accompanied by an elderly maid. At least the ratio improved a little bit. I couldn’t say I was any more interested though. *The average age around here is still way too high. What’s the point of hanging out with a bunch of forty-somethings?*
“I am Murimour, mother of *Merielle*. Personally, I was far more concerned about giving you my thanks today than about our treaty with the neighboring municipality. I cannot quite bring myself to show you my gratitude given the circumstances, but I am still thankful that you saved our daughter. I suppose you did also save us from that bandit, so I thank you for that as well.”
The old man shook his head. “My dear, the treaty with the neighboring city is of the utmost importance. Regardless, Haruka-kun, as Duke Meropapa Sim Omui, I give you my thanks.”
Then they blathered on for what felt like hours, giving me a pointless info dump containing the names of other nobles, the country, and the king. I didn’t bother paying attention. I couldn’t remember names anyway, so telling me was a waste of time in the first place. *Definitely nothing important—ignoring it was the best decision of my life.*
Apparently there was some unrest among the aristocrats, and the bandits who attacked Merimeri-san yesterday were actually an elite squad of soldiers handpicked by the neighboring lord. They were sent on a covert mission to kidnap Merimeri-san for political leverage. When their soldiers didn’t return, they sent a different squad to ambush Meridad-san instead.
I didn’t learn anything new about the nerds or my options for home delivery. *Why should I listen? It’s none of my concern!* I joined them in the carriage and returned to town. On our journey back, they kept thanking me and reminding me of the name of the town, whatever it was.

The good news was that the gatekeeper didn’t give me any grief this time. For some reason, Class Rep still did. Ah, I suppose she did ask me not to go anywhere today. I only meant to go get some soy sauce. What was the big deal?

DAY 22
EVENING
Family troubles at the Fishes.
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

LITERALLY TWENTY PEOPLE lectured me for a full hour. They kept asking me why I decided to involve myself in a war between nobles. *You tell me!* I couldn't get emotional at a time like this, but it was important that I wasn't too clinical. We needed to start from the beginning and understand the chain of events that led to this moment. I had to state it in a blunt, straightforward manner.

Eventually, this was my most coherent, convincing explanation:

"Listen, I'm telling you, I didn't just leave town. I went to buy some soy sauce, got chased by a soldier, misled by a maid, and got my passport. Then the gatekeeper yelled at me, so I tried to order some books and got ambushed. Then, I burnt the hair off a bunch of old men in armor and found out the courier was the duke all along. That basically explains everything, right? I bought some soy sauce. It just ended up happening like that! I deny all accusations, I think?"

What? Not a single person thought my explanation was reasonable! I related the events in a logical and orderly fashion. What more could they want?

"It's *soy sauce*," I moaned. "Wouldn't you want some? Wouldn't you buy as much as you could? Why am I the bad guy here? Why is everyone scolding me? I don't care about any war. Don't blame me, blame the nobles. As for me leaving town, the gatekeeper was the one who yelled at me and refused to let me back in. I'm the real victim here! Whose big idea was it to fight a battle in the middle of the road, anyway? I mistook the duke for a delivery driver! I only stopped to order some books, but all my good intentions were betrayed, don't you see? Oh, but I did get some soy sauce after all—look here!"

How could people so thoroughly misunderstand? Were there really people incapable of accepting the truth no matter how many times it was explained? *I'm innocent, I tell ya!*

In the end, I had to sit in the corner and think about my actions!

At least these girls had gotten used to me; no one started crying during my pleas, unlike that one girl I met. I was confident that I had proven myself over and over, and that they did trust me; the girls hadn't tried to take away my independence. They didn't seem to appreciate my actions, though.

While I sat cross-legged facing the wall, I surreptitiously grilled some fish and drizzled it with soy sauce. As soon as they smelled the delicious aroma, they stopped lecturing me. *Fish saves the day,* I thought. I wasn't a

troublemaker after all. I had been falsely accused. I was innocent all along.
Soy sauce is the greatest defense attorney.
Everyone wept with joy as they devoured the fish. The girls must've been homesick. The taste and the smell tugged at everyone's deepest memories. Fish Girl seemed to love it as much as everyone else. *Shouldn't that alarm her parents? What would they say if they saw her eating her own kind?* I was worried about the familial drama that could cause, but she seemed to be enjoying herself, so I let it be. If the Fishes shoved their way in here, shouting bloody murder, I could just grill them, too. Or maybe smoke them? Mmm…
Proven innocent and full of fish, I entered the bath. "Where are you, nerds…? Don't tell me you died." Why was I muttering about the nerds to myself? "I hope I find you soon. I'm starting to get worried."
I left the bath and returned to my room. I had been at this inn for five days now. That meant that I was in town for five days, too. My cave must be lonely. I considered asking the jocks to check on it, but I couldn't just leave my cave in someone else's care.
Come to think of it, the meatheads hadn't ever made it to town. Five long days had passed since I saw them.
I wasn't worried about the nerds. In all likelihood, they were power-leveling and maxing out their skills. They were practically walking, talking strategy guides for fantasy RPGs.
But the jocks were another matter entirely. Were they still in the forest? Why? Did they have to stay there for some reason?
Even if they reached town, and even if I waited for the nerds to show up, I still needed to go back to my cave at least once.
The nerds would come back to town eventually even if I didn't look for them. They would definitely come running to a place called the Lady Finger Boudoir, too. That was for sure, especially after seeing all the other inns in town. This was the only inn with a cute girl standing out front, after all!

DAY 22
NIGHT
They'd passed an event horizon of idiocy, where the very physics of stupidity broke down.
THE FOREST

AS SOON AS I GOT into the forest, I ran into an orc. *Hey, it's been a hot second!* With one swing of my staff, the orc toppled into a useless heap.
The orcs were usually much farther upriver. This was too many, too close to town. Did someone accidentally tell the orcs about all the options for adult entertainment in town? Is that why they all came rushing here? Those imposter bandits were as ugly as orcs, so I doubted that anyone would notice if orcs visited that nameless town. Though they definitely wouldn't be going into town now—I killed them all. *Sucks to be them.*
They were probably happier not going. Life in a big town like that was tough. The whole society revolved around money, but there was no money to be made. Unemployment was rampant. Even striking it rich didn't work—all the money I made short-selling spellstones was confiscated by the Class Rep! And as a final twist of the knife, I was still scolded about money every single day! The whole place left a bad taste in my mouth. *Towns are crueler than the wilderness!*
The forest was overflowing with goblins, as usual. Every once in a while, there was a solitary orc. Was it going for a relaxing constitutional, perhaps? Was the town a popular monster destination?
Killing orcs was easier than before, even though I was the same level. The equipment I bought at the suspicious junk shop was more effective than I had anticipated. It may have cost me 8 million ele, but the equipment was proving its worth. I bet that Pheromone Ring would've worked like a charm.
Even attacking them head-on was no problem at all. I couldn't be *too* careless, but I didn't need to slow myself down by sneaking. Monsters also became significantly more powerful at certain tiers, level 10 being one of them. Even so, taking those tougher monsters down was no problem.
I still preferred to kill them via ambush instead of facing them head-on. I still didn't have any weapon techniques, but as far as I was concerned, those were only good for making someone scream and do cardio until they collapsed, so no complaints here. Weapon techniques made no sense!
Before, I couldn't fight level 10+ goblins face-to-face. Even with a higher power stat, I still couldn't kill them with my attacks. Was that the real purpose of weapon techniques? That would explain the significance of the level wall. While I was able to dodge all of the bandit spies' weapon techniques, if I had tried to block them with my staff, I would have died.

When I brought the Mistletoe Sprig near my Sylvan Staff, it leapt from my hand and entwined itself around the staff. The description of the sprig changed, too: “Mistletoe Sprig: A wooden stick. Staff power-up. ? ? Spell absorption.” That new effect must have been absorbing the monster’s weapon techniques, too. Finding a real counter against weapon techniques was a matter of life or death for me. I didn’t expect spell absorption to solve all my problems, but I didn’t want to die testing it out, either.

I couldn’t tell if that effect came from the Mistletoe Sprig or the Sylvan Staff, but if it meant that I could absorb unblockable weapon techniques, I wouldn’t have to depend only on my ability to dodge.

The delinquents, and even the ordinary boys from my class, were all probably over level 10. They might be level 20…maybe even level 30.

If their stats developed anything like the girls’ stats, they would be way more powerful than the commoners of this world without even accounting for their cheat skills. *Forget the level wall,* I thought. Their stats and skills had to be way past anything I could deal with.

Of course, I was still assuming I’d die in the forest at some point. If that happened, I wouldn’t have to worry about anybody’s stats or skills.

Anyway, the delinquents couldn’t be allowed to leave the forest. Not just for sake of the girls and the nerds, but for all the ordinary people in this world. If they got to town, I was at risk, too. I was the only guy with black hair and eyes in the whole city, so I’d be extremely easy to track down. And if the delinquents made it here, I knew they’d be up to no good.

I’d be able to breathe a little easier if the jocks and nerds were around to give the girls their support.

The town was at least ten days away from where I’d last seen the delinquents. That meant that I could buy some time if I didn’t let them past my cave. The Class Rep and her friends would have time to power level. They had the full support and resources of the Adventurers’ Guild, and I was sure the duke would grant me a favor if I asked. If the nerds came back in the meantime, we would have enough muscle to deal with them.

The nerds were probably the strongest out of everyone. They may have wasted their time nerding about, but they were undeniably powerful. Class Rep and some of the other girls were almost as strong. As long as they had time to prepare, they’d be fine. *I’ll worry about what happens next when it actually happens.*

The delinquents’ strength lay in the fact that they were unscrupulous, nasty, and brutish. It didn’t matter how strong the girls got. It didn’t even matter if the nerds became the strongest people in this entire world. No one was truly safe from the delinquents. They would exploit the naive goodness of their classmates.

I was the only person who could see through their skulduggery. The others knew who they were. *They might forgive the delinquents for the sake of their shared past.* Me? I didn’t even know their names. They were just nobodies from my class. They’d get no sympathy from me.

I didn’t have the level, the skills, the stats, or the equipment. The new gear I got made me way stronger, but I didn’t know if it measured up to the combined cheat skills and weapons of the delinquents. I had Luck on my side, but that was it. I was confident that I had more luck than anyone else in the entire world, yet I had no clue if it made any difference.
My only hope of victory was through superior tactics and judgment. If I stayed in the forest, I’d be able to hone my tactics.
If I managed to kill them, problem solved. If neither side could win, that still benefitted me. Time was on our side.
In the unlikely worst-case scenario where I died, the nerds and Class Rep wouldn’t hesitate to kill the delinquents.
With my death, the nerds and the Class Rep would win.
Not that I wanted things to turn out that way. I wanted to live; I just had to find a way to do it…
The delinquents might have decided to stay in the forest, or they might’ve gone elsewhere—away from town. That was the best-case scenario, but I couldn’t just hope for that. If I stayed in town waiting for something to happen, that still left the jocks in danger.
Neither the jocks nor the delinquents had left the forest yet.
That must have meant that the meathead jocks were holding the delinquents off. After abandoning the nerds and the girls, the meatheads had said they wanted to repay their debt, so they stayed behind to stall the delinquents.
That’s a stupid reason. Leave it to meatheads to come up with something that idiotic.
The meatheads were too committed to sportsmanship. On the other hand, I probably had fewer scruples and more dirty tricks than the delinquents.
The jocks were strong, even without fantasy skills and stats. They just couldn’t let go of pesky concepts like honor. It’d get them killed one day.
I just needed to power up by killing as many monsters as I could. If I was lucky, maybe I could even get to level 10.
My staff had turned into a weapon with powers beyond my comprehension, but I could still use it as a regular staff. No matter how far I was from an opponent, my swings always connected. As long as I was faster, I couldn’t be outnumbered. I could force back ten monsters with a hundred attacks or incinerate a hundred monsters with a thousand spells. I could outlast my opponents in a melee battle, like I did with the bandit spies. *I can do it.*
I had to move quicker than my enemies—attack faster, dodge faster. So long as I was the fastest, I could survive.

I got back to the cave late at night. I eradicated all the monsters in the forest, picked up plenty of mushrooms…and I still hadn’t leveled up! *No fair!*
At least all my ideas, tactics, and strategies had been tested and verified. That was enough for me.

And then, there they were, a bunch of half-dead idiots propped up against the mouth of the cave.
“What’s up? You all look like you’ve seen better days. I thought you dummies were supposed to be strong. Are you guys even alive?”
Tentatively, I prodded one of the jocks with my boot. Something squelched, and he fell on his side, leaving a bloody smear on the cave wall. Many of them were missing limbs, and some had even lost an eye. Their clothes were caked with their own blood.
Holding my nose against that fungal aroma, I doused them with my best potions. The general store lady told me that these were potent enough to grow back missing limbs. These were beyond simple healing potions: they were top-of-the-line regeneration potions. Whatever this potion touched healed immediately. Wounds knit closed, limbs grew back, and eyes popped into once-hollow sockets. I had tested these potions out on the soldiers earlier today, and besides the baldness, they had totally recovered. *Why aren’t these idiots saying something stupid yet?*
A jock, fully healed, jumped up and shouted, “Yooo! Haruka, what is *up*?!”
I sneered, “You idiots are in no position to be asking that so casually. How stupid can you get? Didn’t I tell you to just stay safe and get to town? How—what kind of idiotic things did you get yourselves involved in?”
“Well, we weren’t about to wuss out again after we abandoned everyone once before, y’know?”
One of the other meatheads added, “Seemed like you were going to come back, so we decided to kick back and chill out here.”
Another jock rubbed his limbs and started to stretch. “Thanks for the shrooms, bro. They’re really starting to kick in, dude. We’d be dead for real if you didn’t show up.”
“We knew it’d work out in the end. And we were right!”
Just how stupid can you get?
“What are you talking about?! If I hadn’t shown up when I did, you’d all be dead! And if I didn’t happen to have these powerful potions, what did you even expect me to do? You should’ve just come to town! You can’t risk everything and just assume you won’t die! Idiots!”
They’d found new levels of stupidity I believed were only theoretically possible.
“For real?!” they shouted.
I yelled in response, “Why did you keep fighting after losing your arms and legs? Why didn’t you stop when your eyes were gouged and your bodies torn to shreds? How did you even get here without totally bleeding out?! Do you have any idea how stupid that is?”
I took a deep breath and calmed myself before continuing, “I don’t need to remind you how stupid you were. Please, just get some sleep.”
They’d passed an event horizon of idiocy, where the very physics of stupidity broke down.

I should’ve known this would happen. I knew their personalities, and I knew something was off when no one came out of the woods. I should’ve known. I was the real idiot.

DAY 22
MIDNIGHT
Basically the more you talk to them, the stupider they become.
THE CAVE

THE IDIOTS AWOKE in much better condition. They had been on the verge of death, so they weren't fully recovered yet. Despite their near-death experience, they weren't cured of their idiocy. *They'll be idiots until the end of time*.

I caught them up on everything that had happened. "…I haven't managed to find the nerds yet. I'm telling you, please go to the town and meet up with the Class Rep and her friends. Just tell them you were stupid and apologize."

I estimated that their full recovery would take about three more days. Recovery was underselling what they were going through. It was more like resurrection.

They tried to tell me what happened, but the idiots gave me zero context, and nothing they said made any sense. I tried to deduce what had happened from their incoherent retelling. I was at least certain that their survival was nothing short of miraculous.

These five jocks were known as some of Japan's top athletes. They lasted as long as they did because they could make snap decisions, fight enemies without fear, and devise battle formations and team tactics on the fly.

They couldn't actually win, but they kept fighting. That's how I knew they were idiots.

All five of them responded in turn. Did they always talk in order of seniority?

"Nah, bro, we're all better, right?"

"Run away to town? I don't know."

"We'll stick with ya. You're going to do it, ain'tcha?"

"You'd be nuts to take him on solo."

"No kidding. If we're going to town, let's all go together!"

These idiots couldn't even think properly, let alone make reasonable decisions.

I understood in that moment what made them brilliant athletes. They could make the right snap judgments and accomplish the impossible by instinct, but they were totally screwed if they had to use their brains. Basically, the more they talked, the dumber they got. Underneath their stupid surface, they only had greater depths of stupidity. They listened to their gut instincts, so their brains atrophied. *Explaining new concepts to people with vestigial brains is torture,* I thought.

“I know it takes a while for anything to sink into your thick heads, so I’ll repeat myself, okay? You have to go to town, and I have to stay here. The end. Got it?”
“Got it, champ,” they answered in unison.
What a pain. They technically agreed, but I knew that I’d have to confirm it with each of them individually. Then they each said their goodbyes. My hand stung from the cavalcade of high-fives.
It’s like having to explain why one equals one, I thought. There was no explanation other than one is equal to one; it was a fundamental axiom of mathematics. It was a ridiculous thing to try to explain.
Whoever the jocks were terrified by, he wasn’t normal. The guys had run amok, attacked the girls, and the Class Rep stopped them. After that, everything should’ve gone back to normal. Instead, everything fell apart. At the time, no one realized why.
Our class didn’t *choose* to split up. It wasn’t that simple. There was an unknown variable.
That hidden variable wasn’t a normal guy. He’d faked normalcy this whole time, but he was crazy. He went to any length to convince people that he was normal.
He arrived in this world and remained totally inconspicuous and unimportant. Mundane. Everyone else reacted in their own ways, but he didn’t.
He wasn’t notable in any way when we were all summoned to a fantasy world, nor when monsters appeared, not even when my classmates quarreled.
A person like that isn’t normal. He’s deranged!
Completely average, with no unusual or distinguishing qualities? Nothing could be more perfectly abnormal.
That perfectly abnormal guy was the real reason why the Class Rep couldn’t keep the class together. *He* split them up.
Normally, the meatheads would’ve taken charge by instinct when things fell apart. It wasn’t normal that no one helped the nerds or that the Class Rep gave up on uniting the class. The mean girls wouldn’t have normally left on their own, either. It was definitely not normal that the camp was totally deserted when I got there. The whole situation was so bizarre that someone had to notice. From the very beginning, no one had acted like themselves. *He* had manipulated everyone.
There was only one person behind everything that went wrong.
That’s why I had to stay by myself. There was no other way.
“Wow!” I exclaimed to myself. “My first time alone in a while!”
I had my cave all to myself for the first time in days. *The Revenge of the Shut-In.*
I sent the idiots packing with a mountain of mushrooms filling their packs and directions to town filling their heads. *They should be fully recovered by the time they get to that nameless place.*

It was good to be back. Not even a month had passed since I was summoned here, but I felt like I was in my real home. *This must be what it feels like to have a place of your own.*

The cave was so quiet that all of the cacophony, bustle, and hubbub of the girls felt like a distant, fading dream.

DAY 23
MORNING
Is this a game where all the goblins get to be kings? That sounds horrible!
THE CAVE

AS USUAL, I had fish for breakfast. However, today I was a different man. I had ascended. Humans were indeed capable of radical change, and my transformation was complete. A new world of sensation—of *pleasure*—had revealed itself to me. A world with soy sauce. My precious soy sauce! Fried fish with soy sauce, the moment I was anticipating. *Going to town wasn't a mistake after all. This is incredible!*

Adhering to cave hermit tradition, I embarked on a relaxing outing to harvest mushrooms and dispose of goblins. The goblins must have been eating those mushrooms. Their population was out of control and ruining my mushroom harvest. Like mold growing in the bath, they needed a thorough and ruthless scrubbing. Mold was technically more like mushrooms than goblins, though. *Try not to think about it. I don't.*

I didn't even bother casting spells. Running and leaping through the forest, I smashed any goblins I saw.

As I went deeper, I encountered drastically higher level goblins. My level, as always, didn't get any higher. Since I hadn't killed the soldiers the other day, I didn't get any experience from them. But despite the mounds of monster corpses in my wake, I was still stuck at level 9.

"I don't think I've ever gone this far out," I said to myself. "Maybe I could use some gobbo-cide spray on their nest and exterminate the pests for good. Do they carry that at the general store?"

I took down a level 19 goblin. It was impressive for a goblin, with stats higher than some orcs.

Thanks to weapon techniques and the level wall, I'd assumed that level 10+ goblins would be tough, but they were hardly stronger than level 5 ones. They became more challenging at level 15, so I had to start killing them with magic. As long as I dodged, countered with spells, and followed through with a finishing strike, I could survive. I just had to keep my balance, keep my wits about me, run, and fight.

I had a feeling all the spellstones I was collecting would make me rich. They were probably all E-class.

If I tried to sell these stones at the guild, they'd go bankrupt again and kick up a huge fuss about being unable to pay back their debts.

I spotted a huge goblin. Oh, what do we have here? This one's on another level. I used Appraisal.

Goblin King A
RACE: Goblin
LV: 23
HP: 110
MP: 31
VIT: 155
POW: 156
SPE: 49
DEX: 22
RES: 11
INT: 4
LUK: 25
COMBAT SKILLS: Hammer Mastery Lv7, Great Strike Lv6, Body Slam Lv4, Iron Wall Lv 1, Herculean Strength Lv7, Adamantine Lv2
SKILLS: Intimidate Lv3, Super Horny Lv8, Harden Lv4, Daunt Lv3, Terror Lv2
EQUIPMENT: Club

A king was the next level up from a boss. Does that mean the Queen Bee could evolve into some sort of mean girl empress? That's terrifying!
The king swung its club at me. This was the first goblin who didn't just brandish it while running my way. Maybe even the meatheads could evolve to this level of intelligence? They seem dumber with every level, though. Do they have a special "meathead" skill?
I knew that I'd die if I tried to block that swing, but I was fortunately quick enough to dodge. The goblin king was a whole new level of danger.
Flourishing my Sylvan Staff and infusing it with magic, I crept closer. A razor-sharp arc of light crackled along the edge of my staff. In a moment that felt like an eternity, I slashed.
That attack took all of my concentration, and I still wasn't sure it was enough. That singular instant determined who lived and who died. Before my staff connected, I infused all of my spells into the staff. In the span of a single step, I had swung the Sylvan Staff with all my combined magical and physical might.
I couldn't tell exactly what happened, but the goblin king tumbled to the ground, dead.
I couldn't advance if I couldn't defeat the king. But my attack worked. It was a good sign.
Farther in the depths of the forest, I spotted a potential mushroom growing on a log. It was a long time since I'd seen one of those. I never forgot that flavor. I quickly roasted the mushroom as I plunged deeper into the ancient forest.
"Potential mushroom and soy sauce is the ultimate combination!" I wept. "The flavor! It's *so good*!"

From then on, I periodically ran into goblin kings. Was this a normal quantity of kings? Did kings like wandering around the deepest parts of the forest? Was it okay to kill this many kings? I hoped that I wasn't causing any diplomatic incidents.
My HP was totally full, and I had barely used any MP either. Most importantly, I could defeat the kings. My life hung in the balance every time I used that instantaneous attack, but I still managed to take them out one after another.

I assumed that I was nearing the center of the forest, but the woods seemed to extend for miles ahead. I had been fighting level 25+ kings for a while. Weren't these supposed to be boss fights? What was a king, anyway? With this many kings, how small were their domains? Was there a king of kings that ruled over them? Did those goblins think of themselves as kings? Were they playing some sort of goblin variant of king of the hill? That sounded horrible! This was too many kings, damn it!
Goblin kings seemed to get a massive strength boost after level 25.
If there were kobold kings, I'd be screwed, I thought. They'd bite my head off!
I imagined huge jaws snapping shut on my head and shuddered.
I could kill goblin kings, but they were so strong that I didn't feel like I was training anything. I couldn't block their attacks or land multiple blows, and I had to fight just one at a time. All I could do was overclock myself, close in, and throw all of my power into a single kill-or-be-killed slash. One mistake and I was dead.
Goblin kings hate him! He discovered One Weird Trick to instantaneously slay monsters: the overclocked hiding-in-plain-sight killing slash. I felt more like a one-trick pony than someone with one weird trick.
I probably shouldn't go any farther today. Maybe start hunting kobolds after lunch? I desperately wanted to avoid meeting any kobold kings. They would definitely bite my head off. I mulled it over as I walked and spotted three level 29 goblin kings soon after.
Yeah, I'd definitely be dead if they surrounded me. I quickly killed one, but the other two were getting too close. If I didn't do something, they'd flank and kill me. *This is hardly a good way to practice fighting!*
I took a step forward and caved in the second goblin king's face. Then, barely dodging with a half-step backwards, I stabbed the last one through the neck before it recovered from its swing.
Holy crap, holy crap, that was close. I'll definitely die if I try anything like that again. I can't, I can't, I can't. That was too close. I had felt the reverberation of the club crashing into the dirt where I stood a moment before. My one weird trick really was a life-or-death gambit. I was a half-step from doom.

Goosebumps covered my entire body. I felt a cold sweat break out on my back and forehead. This is way too much. I'd be pulp if my aim, my distance, or my timing was even a fraction off.

I had slaughtered all the monsters on my way here, so it was much faster getting back to the cave. *I should get back by noon. Should be almost there?* If I had made it to the center of the forest, did that mean those were the bosses of the forest? *In that case, have some damn treasure or something! There was literally nothing!*

Although if they had carried treasure chests, they wouldn't have been able to fight in the first place.

DAY 23
MORNING
How exactly do our class rankings work?
INTERLUDE:
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

I WENT TO CHECK ON Haruka-kun that morning, only to discover that he had taken his things and disappeared. He left a message at the front desk, but it was incoherent.
“I knew he was going to leave sooner or later,” I muttered to myself. “I wonder why…why didn’t he at least say something?”
I read the message again: “I’m off to see the idiots. Level up and wait here.” He went back into the forest, but he also asked us to wait. Did that mean he planned to come back? If that was the case, he should’ve at least added “I’ll be back.” A note this short was totally ambiguous. *I don’t know what he’s planning, and I’m not sure I want to know…*
I told the other girls.
“Let’s…let’s go to the forest!” Shimazaki-san said. “Like, to the cave!”
“Haruka-kun told us to wait here.”
“We need to go! He’ll totally abandon us again!”
“Do you want to go and fight, then?” I asked. “Against people? Against our own classmates?”
“I can…I can fight,” said Fukunuki-san. “Even if it’s against the boys…even if it’s scary, I’ll fight. I want to help Haruka-kun…”
“It doesn’t matter whether or not we can fight,” said Chika-chan. “Let’s just go! We need to help him! How could he…”
“No! Stop being ridiculous!” I shouted. “He told us to stay here and wait. Do you want to die after everything he did to save us? I won’t let you throw your lives away!”
I restrained my voice, tried to blink away the tears. *If we do as he tells us…*
“B-but Shimazaki-chan, you and your friends want to go, don’t you?” said Vice Rep A. “You can’t go alone!”
“We’ll be totes fine!” Shimazaki-san protested. “We were enthralled before—we’ll just get enthralled again! Just let us go! We said we’d follow him and that’s, like, what we want to do!”
“Don’t be silly, Shimazaki-chan,” Vice Rep B said. “He told you to stay here and wait, didn’t he? You should only go if you’re prepared to kill.”
“But I…I can’t stand it! I can’t stand that he’d go…all alone…”
“He wants to avoid casualties, but he might become one himself…”
At that moment, we heard a voice outside the inn.
“Hi, cute flyers girl! We brought you a souvenir!”

A group of four guys entered the inn and stared at us blankly. It was Oda-kun and his friends. They were back.
“Class Rep? Is that you?”
Pandemonium broke out. Everyone was shouting and crying, no one understood what anyone else was saying, and we all talked past each other. They totally forgot the normal flow of conversation as they described all the agony they’d been through in a frenzy. So much had happened. *So, this is what Haruka-kun meant when he said they couldn’t read the room…*
Shimazaki-san and her friends burst into tears the moment they saw them. Bowing deeply, they apologized and begged for forgiveness. Shimazaki-san told them how hard they’d tried to find Oda-kun and his friends to thank them properly. She mentioned that Haruka-kun disappeared. Out of nowhere, Vice Rep B decided to leave through the town gates. I had to run out and drag her back inside. Then Oda-kun and his friends tried to ghost on us themselves. I stopped them and forced everyone to sit down to at least mutually agree on a common goal and develop a strategy. My thoughts were all over the place, but I got everyone to settle down.
Vice Rep B looked at me in confusion. “What’s your problem?”
“What do you mean? You just tried to leave by yourself!”
“Well, if I want to join Haruka-kun, I had to be willing to kill, right?”
“You were the one who decided that!” a chorus of voices shouted.
She’s prepared to kill! Why did everyone think this girl was the nicest in our class? People just judged her by her assets, didn’t they? Is that how my classmates measured niceness, by bra size?!
“Shimazaki-san, you need to calm down, too. We’re all friends here!” I called.
“We have to go,” wailed Shimazaki-san. “We found Oda-kun and apologized, so we have to go! *Please* let us go! Please! We’re also prepared to kill if we have to! We’ll do whatever it takes!”
I had to admit that Shimazaki-san and her friends were at a pretty impressive level. They outleveled us because of the extra experience they kept getting from Servitude. That meant that Haruka-kun was out there, fighting monsters by himself.
Shimazaki-san and her friends could undoubtedly handle strong enemies. If they were trying to protect Haruka-kun, I was confident that they would even kill one of their own classmates.
I remembered Haruka-kun talking about how terrifying they were in battle, like religious zealots. He was right—they were believers in Haruka-kun, wild to express their gratitude, crazy enough to be willingly enthralled. He was their savior, their benefactor; he gave them their world, and that’s why they were willing to do anything for him.
It wasn’t too far off from how all of us felt, even Oda-kun and his friends. We would all fight for Haruka-kun and were prepared to kill if necessary. It might have just been empty resolve, but that was enough to make everyone desperate to go help him.

I saw Oda-kun try to sneak out the door again, so I leapt to my feet and grabbed him by the collar. “Why do you think he told us to wait here?” I growled.
They talked over each other as they listed myriad possible reasons: we’d hold him back and get in his way, he didn’t want us to kill or get killed, he didn’t trust us, he thought we were weak, he was better off alone, and we were no fun to be around.
“He’s worried,” I explained, “that one of you will get taken as a hostage.”
“Don’t worry about us!” exclaimed Oda-kun. “We’re all over level 70, and we’ve got plenty of good weapons!”
They just went ahead and reached level 70 without even considering that anyone was worried about them. The guild master had told us that the strongest people in the world were over level 100, and they were known as monsters. With the boosts that they got by coming from another world, Oda-kun and his friends were probably on par with S-rank adventurers. Their cheat skills probably made them the strongest people in this world.
But he also told us that even those ridiculously powerful adventurers might barely manage victory against a single Dire Greenwolf. Haruka-kun crashed into it and the rest of its pack. He literally described it as a traffic accident. By leaving us behind, Haruka-kun was really saying that…
“We should stay here and protect ourselves,” Oda-kun realized.
“I think so too, since we don’t even know what the enemy is after,” one of the girls agreed.
I concurred. Haruka-kun had collected so many spellstones that it bankrupted the guild. He had accidentally put the duke in his debt twice over by saving his daughter and later rescuing him. He wasn’t even supposed to leave Omui, yet he saved them by accident. He got favors from the leaders of this city *by accident*. If anyone in the town spotted him, the only other black-haired, black-eyed person besides us, we’d know immediately. The adventurers, soldiers, and entire town were on the lookout for him. That made this city the safest possible place to be.
Everyone turned on me and shouted, “If you’re so intent on stopping us, why are you the only one fully armed and ready to leave?!”
Huh? Everyone is scolding me now? What is happening?

DAY 23
MORNING
Getting more sex appeal would've been the wrong move.
THE FOREST

MY NEW TRAINING REGIME was beyond hard. At first, I regretted getting so carried away with the new one-hit move. Every time I did it, I had to build up speed over a long distance just to have the power to pull it off. But after a while, I started to master it. It didn't use up any MP, which I guess was pretty responsible on my part—and after a while, I could do it in a single clean slash.

In principle, the attack worked because I transferred all my instantaneous acceleration into my attack. Through trial and error, I worked out how much of that explosive burst of speed to retain as momentum and how to move my body to minimize any loss of speed. I weaved the possible variations together and polished the technique to perfection.

Finally, after finishing off countless monsters, I reached level 10. On my list of combat techniques, Life or Death Lv1 appeared. All that practice finally paid off. *Not much, but a little.*

Did this mean that I could invent my own skills in this world? It was literally called Life or Death, which was how I'd started thinking of it while I made it up. Maybe there were rules and requirements for what could become a skill. I'd come up with plenty of my own techniques before, after all—Human Cannonball, Human Missile, Human Traffic Accident… *Okay, I'm glad I didn't get those skills!* But nothing like this had ever happened before. I had to be careful not to come up with any new special attacks unless I was absolutely sure. *They might turn into skills.* I remembered Flame Whorl, which had been a total disaster. Although maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I made sure to only come up with cool names. *Mach 1 Body Slam? I should workshop that.* It still sounded like a traffic accident. What would be a cool name… Collective Wolf Crash wasn't much better. *I shouldn't waste my time thinking about this.*

At long last, I was Level 10. I must've killed a thousand monsters to get there. If everyone had to kill a thousand monsters just to get to level 10, it would've caused a mass monster extinction.

It probably wasn't just the quantity of monsters, but the quality. Did I level up because I started fighting goblin kings? I fought plenty of regular goblins too, and it still took ages. *But this is no time to check my stats!*

I noticed that my level had gone up and, while I was celebrating, forgot that I was still in the depths of the forest. Before me stood not just any goblin, not even a goblin king, but a full-blown goblin emperor. I was wrong—they

weren’t playing a giant game of King of the Hill, it was Emperor of the Hill all along!
But here I was, overjoyed at reaching level 10, finding myself face-to-face with a level 50 monster. It didn’t just rain on my parade—it dumped a whole hurricane on it! As soon as I’d scaled one level wall, I faced a monster that had scaled four more. *A deflation crisis in town and now an inflation crisis in the woods! This world needs an economist!* Level 10 seemed totally worthless now. I’d been so happy, so excited. *How about showing some more consideration for others, emperor!*
If one of those attacks even grazed me, I’d be smashed into a bloody mass of broken bits.
So, I dodged and I parried. I riposted—slashing, stabbing, and bashing seemed to have no effect.
It swung its club in a wide arc, leaving no openings. The club flew in every direction, totally unpredictable. The emperor hemmed me in, giving me nowhere to retreat to.
I had to evade *everything.*
I did get a few attacks in when I wasn’t dodging and weaving, but they did nothing, even if I built up momentum beforehand. Freezing it, incinerating it, none of it worked. They didn’t even slow it down. And Flame Whorl wasn’t even worth trying—the monster was already bald. I appraised it while I had the chance.

Goblin Emperor A
RACE: Goblin
LV: 50
HP: 456
MP: 97
VIT: 517
POW: 553
SPE: 94
DEX: 38
RES: 19
INT: 11
LUK: 41
COMBAT SKILLS: Hammer Mastery MAX, Great Strike MAX, Body Slam Lv9, Iron Wall Lv 8, Herculean Strength Lv9, Adamantine Lv7, Pulverize Lv7, Barrage Lv7
SKILLS: Super Horny MAX, Daunt MAX, Terror Lv7, Regeneration Lv5, Magic Resistance Lv5
EQUIPMENT: Club

Even though it was a goblin, its speed nearly matched my own. *That’s not fair!* And no wonder my attacks weren’t doing any damage—it had Regeneration!

I felt a pang of despair as I started to run out of MP. Even if I exhausted all my magical might, it would just regenerate. Spells did nothing more than drain my MP.
I should have been able to freeze its legs in place with Ice Magic or paralyze it with Lightning Magic, but it resisted everything I threw at it.
I would've died if it wasn't for the Evasion Cloak: Spe +20% Evasion Bonus (small) I bought. In hindsight, I was lucky I hadn't gone for the buffs to my sex appeal like I'd wanted. *Is this the cosmos telling me I don't deserve it? I…I think I might cry!*
Shit! I narrowly dodged a swing that would've taken off my head—I could smell my hair burning! *I can't afford to go bald!*
That swing left the emperor wide open for a counterattack, if only I could reach it. If I never attacked, I'd never win.
All this fighting was making me hungry! I somersaulted past a heavy swing and yanked some dried mushrooms out of my bag. I didn't have enough time to sprinkle soy sauce on them, so I just shoved fistfuls of them in my mouth as I evaded blows.
This is the end.
The club was coming right at me, and I didn't have time to get out of the way. I couldn't deflect the blow either.
With no other options, I stepped forward. The emperor adjusted his swing, but it was too late. The momentum carried his club crashing straight into his own face.
I dodged back and repeated the trick. *If I can't damage the emperor with my staff, I'll let the emperor do the dirty work himself.* Once he started swinging, he couldn't control it. Again and again, I baited him into attacks so that he'd lose control of his club and hurt himself.
But no matter how often I did that, the goblin emperor didn't even stumble.
Desperate, I forced an opening. I took a half-step forward, too close to the stinking monster. Trying to keep his eyes on me, he tripped over his own feet. *This is my only chance.*
"Life or Death!" I shouted, and my staff opened a gash across the emperor's barrel chest.
It wasn't enough. It didn't even do serious damage. Nothing would stop the goblin from regenerating. The bloody wound clotted as I watched. Wasting no time, I used Appraisal once more.

Goblin Emperor A
HP: 282/456
MP: 56/97

I'd drained half of my MP so far. If I didn't land consecutive attacks, I'd never outpace the goblin's regeneration. One Life or Death attack wasn't enough. I needed speed more than power. As I evaded attacks, I knocked him off-balance, used the Life or Death technique, and backed away before

he could retaliate. The shadows cast by trees grew longer as our battle raged on.

By now, I knew that my luck was the only thing keeping me alive. I should've died 999 times out of a thousand. I'm sorry for every doubting you, Lady Luck; you've been pulling your weight this whole time! Thank you for all you have done, Noble Lady Luck! But why did everyone blame me for every problem even when I was innocent? Why didn't you help me out then, Luck? I wondered. Some mysteries could never be solved.

Without conscious thought, my legs moved of their own accord and my arms swung the staff. At last, the goblin emperor stopped moving. I won. *I should've died a hundred times over.*

I had no clue how much time had passed. My mind was consumed by battle; everything else was irrelevant. *Well, except for my quick snack break.*

There were still more goblins out there. It was hard to believe that, even though I could've died a thousand times—ten thousand times—I still had all my limbs, my eyes weren't gouged out, and my torso wasn't a mass of lacerations. *At least, not yet.*

DAY 23
NOON
No one had known that a night could feel like an eternity.
INTERLUDE:
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

IN THE END, we didn't fully agree on what to do, but as a compromise, we did some reconnaissance in the woods near town. Our goals were to hunt some monsters, level up, and investigate. It was a thinly veiled justification to try to find Haruka-kun. We split into five adventuring parties but all stuck close together as we advanced.

"There aren't any monsters here!" someone cried. "How are we supposed to level up?"

She was right. Even the forest had no living monsters. They were all completely annihilated. There was only one possible culprit.

"Should we try going a little farther?" I asked.

Without anyone answering, we all pushed deeper. I kept asking if we should stop, but no one did.

"We've gone too far to stop now." Shimazaki-san said. "I don't plan on going back without, like, finding out what happened."

It was pointless. If Haruka-kun didn't want us to go after him, he must have had his reasons. *We shouldn't be doing this,* I thought.

Everyone wanted to go one step farther, to get one step closer to him. They thought that maybe we would catch up to him, and if we didn't, we could at least find clues about what had happened to him.

We wanted to level up, but there were no monsters to fight.

A few hours passed. We'd entered the forest three hours ago, and we still kept going. This wasn't what we'd planned to do, but no one wanted to turn back. No one even suggested it.

I knew it came down to me—*I* had to insist that we turn around, no matter how much I wanted to keep going. I had to be the one to say it, because no one else would. Haruka-kun had said that I was a natural leader. I wanted to believe that, so I had to take command.

But I didn't say anything. We continued, one step after another, toward the cave. I remembered coming to this world. Everyone was lost, uncertain, miserable…until we came to that cave. It was the first place we could all relax. Before we knew it, we were all laughing and having fun together. We lectured Haruka-kun over and over, but we still appreciated everything he did. Our tomorrows were brighter because of him. And Haruka-kun was somewhere out there, totally alone.

No matter how far we went, we didn't see a single monster.

After we finally turned back, everyone was silent. There weren't any monsters to slow us down, but we still didn't reach Omui until nightfall. We just couldn't muster the energy. Today was an utter failure; we walked all day, but didn't accomplish *anything*.

When I finally said, "Let's turn around," disappointment surfaced on everyone's faces. They couldn't disguise the hurt and sadness that they felt. They nodded, their heads drooping. I'm sure my face looked just the same.

Oda-kun and his friends booked rooms at the same inn. To prevent anyone from sneaking away in the night, I changed room assignments and set up a watch rotation. That was the only way to stop people from going after him. It was the only way I could stop myself.

The flyers girl brought us our meal, bewildered by our visible distress. Our first objective was successful: we had reconnected with Oda-kun and his friends. Even so, we ate our dinners in silence. No one wanted to talk, nor did they know what to say when they tried. Somehow, the absence of just Haruka-kun had made everyone—even the nerds, who usually didn't care about anyone else—slip into a pensive, distressed mode.

I'd never realized how long a night could be.

At some point, that ecstatic, riotous atmosphere quietly slipped away. Those days moved too fast; we didn't have enough time…

No one had known that a night could feel like an eternity.

DAY 23
NIGHT
In addition to goblins and kobolds, old men must be stopped.
THE CAVE

I GROANED A LONG, low moan when I entered the bath. It was nothing less than heavenly. *I sound like a gross old man, though! Was I transforming into an old man?* Was it contagious? Did an old man bite me and spread the infection? I needed to wipe out this plague before it swallowed me completely.

I tweaked my hot tub until it worked just the way I wanted—I installed water jets powered by Wind Magic. Ten days after I first put it together, I had it just right. It was *perfect*. Despite having it working for a while, this was the first time I actually got to use it. I had no regrets, though, because I knew that twenty beautiful high school girls had used this very bath. I was sitting in the same place *they'd* sat! Imagined scenarios of those pretty girls enjoying the hot tub flitted through my mind. No, the only regret I had was that the jocks had also used the bath. They kept showing up in my happy daydreams like invasive thoughts.

"No visitors today, I suppose?" I said out loud.

I got out of the bath and drank some juice.

I sighed—something had to be done about those old men. They had to be quarantined as biohazards. I couldn't let them spread their old man habits any longer! I even caught myself keeping my hand on my lower back like an ancient geezer. *I'm only sixteen! Is this the start of a horrid transformation?!* I needed to find some anti-aging herbs.

Life or Death worked on kobolds, even with their speed. It was a close-range technique—usable from a half-step away, a whole step at most. Through the perfect alignment of my magic, my skills, and my control of momentum, I was able to instantaneously swing my staff, an ultimate death blow. If I couldn't repeat it perfectly every single time, I'd be killed. I couldn't make a single mistake.

Through practice, I'd managed to turn a step forward and a slash into a single flowing motion. If I lunged and then attacked, it wouldn't work. I tweaked and practiced the technique until I could perform it from muscle memory, until it was second nature.

How many times did I nearly die today? Against the goblin emperor I'd literally left it all up to chance. I was sure I would've died if it weren't for my underappreciated Luck stat.

All this exercise and practice made me feel like I was possessed by the spirit of some hot-blooded moron.

The more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that meathead idiocy was contagious! I still had all my limbs, my eyes were intact, and my guts weren't spilling out, so at least my case of idiocy wasn't as terminal as theirs. *This still isn't good. If I screw up once, I'm worm food!*
If Idiot showed up on my stat screen, I was gonna be so pissed. I checked my stats, bracing myself for the worst.

NAME: Haruka
RACE: Human
LV: 11
JOB: —
HP: 164
MP: 170
VIT: 154
POW: 158
SPE: 166
DEX: 165
MIN: 174
INT: 181
LUK: Max (Above Limit)
SP: 311
COMBAT SKILLS: Cane Mastery Lv9, Evasion Lv8, Foresight Lv9, Magic Infusion Lv8, Life or Death Lv2, Rapid Movement Lv1
MAGIC: Heat Lv4, Movement Lv7, Weight Lv7, Packing Lv7, Four Elements Lv6, Wood Lv6, Lightning Lv4, Ice Lv4
SKILLS: General Health Lv5, Sensitivity Lv5, Calisthenics Lv8, Walking Lv7, Servitude Lv5, Appraisal Lv8, Clairvoyance Lv7, Presence Detection Lv8, Enemy Tracking Lv8, Magic Manipulation Lv8, Presence Concealment Lv6, Stealth Lv8, Hiding Lv8, Map Lv5, Focus Lv8, Physics Resistance Lv6, MP Regeneration Lv8, Stamina Regeneration Lv7, Parallel Thinking Lv6, Serial Thinking Lv6, High-Speed Thinking Lv7, Dash Lv5, Airwalk Lv5, Overclock Lv5, God's Eye Lv1
TITLES: Shut-In Lv5, NEET Lv5, Loner Lv5, Sorcerer Lv8
ABILITIES: Corporate Proactiveness Lv4, Master of None Lv5, Blockhead Lv7
EQUIPMENT: Wooden Stick?, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Contact Lenses?, Ring of the Destitute, Bag of Holding, Monster Bracelet Power +31% Speed +19%, Black Hat

Not only had I leveled up, I gained two levels! The quality of monsters really must've made a difference. Someone, please just publish a strategy guide for this world already, it makes no sense, I thought. My skills would need an entire separate guide.

Each level up was boosting my stats by a substantial amount. I'd had a theory for a while about why that was, and going to town confirmed it—the potential mushrooms were making my stats increase abnormally quickly. The goblin kings and emperors must've been eating the same mushrooms. But I was the only one to eat them with soy sauce, a flavor too luxurious even for an emperor.

HP and MP mushrooms were rare and valuable, but they were known. But no one in town even knew that potential mushrooms existed. Even for mushrooms, they were rare. When they did grow, I guessed that goblins gobbled them up and turned into kings and emperors, which kept people away from those places entirely. That was why the ladies at the general store and the guild hadn't heard of them. You had to be ridiculously lucky to even encounter them. And I was the only one who knew how well they went with soy sauce. I was the only one who'd ever tried that divine combination! That worked out just great for me.

Each of the more powerful goblins dropped power boosting Monster Bracelets: +1% bracelets from boss goblins, +3% from goblin kings, and +6% from goblin emperors. Same for the kobolds. The different monster bracelets fused into one when I stacked them but stayed the same size and weight as a regular bracelet.

Thinking purely about experience gains, focusing on weak monsters was better because there were way more to fight. The monsters near the center of the forest were stronger but much less common. The bracelets changed my calculations—they were so overpowered that it made it worth it to go after the tough monsters. If I got enough, I could get a 100% boost to my power and speed. Maybe too rare, since they were all dead now. But boss monsters had those bracelets, which meant that my best strategy was to fight them: I could get a 100% power and speed boost.

Life or Death had also gone up to level 2. I guess I had improved it quite a bit, so calling it level 2 made sense. Could I level it up again?

Then there was Rapid Movement, which I had used through some of my gear effects. I must've learned it myself from using Movement and high-speed magic manipulation so often. It was like a generic version of Life or Death. I was also impressed that Overclock had gone up four levels, though I guessed I *had* been pretty reckless with it.

Calisthenics had jumped up three levels. Doing exercises every morning felt like a mistake; it seemed to level faster from just using my body, even in battle. Shouldn't it have a different name? *Goddamn it, why doesn't any of this make sense?!*

It didn't feel like the intense movements I executed for Life or Death had anything to do with my morning exercises. I had a feeling that even if I reached max level in Calisthenics, I wouldn't suddenly turn into that exercise guy on Japanese TV.

True, I was forcing my body through some crazy athletic feats. I didn't have much of a choice, either. I'd get killed if I didn't push myself.

One thing that I didn’t understand at all was God’s Eye. What did that mean? Could I see god? I didn’t want to ever hear another lecture from that useless geezer! Next time I saw him, I’d beat the crap out of him!
Well, we all have our limits. I should sleep.

DAY 24
MORNING
Who's worse: the worst of the worst or the master troublemaker?
THE CAVE

IN THE END, the visitor I was expecting never arrived. Not that he was invited, anyway. I don't need visitors for the rest of my life!

I was just a roadblock to him. A scarecrow. All I needed to do was sit here. I wasn't fond of this plan, but he wouldn't like it either. He was the worst of the worst, but I was apparently the greatest troublemaker. At least, that's what Class Rep insisted!

His existence was fundamentally horrible, but I was only as awful as I needed to be. I was an expert at causing chaos and messing things up. Class Rep would put her seal of approval on that statement, too. *I'm starting to lose track; am I the bad guy?*

Time was on my side, but there were drawbacks to waiting.

He must have been observing me, gathering data, and improving his calculations. In that case, I should use what little time I had to get stronger. It could be all for naught, but it was better than doing nothing. Even small gains would go a long way.

I ate more fish today before setting out. I wouldn't normally eat fish with bread, but I had no rice.

How could foreigners stand this?

If the general store lady got her hands on some rice, everyone's minds would be blown.

Yet again, I set out to hunt mushrooms and goblins.

I didn't have time to make it to level 20, or even level 15. Maybe level 14 was doable. He'd probably show by that point.

I barely made it to level 11. How long will that take?

If leveling was too slow, I shouldn't focus on that. In the meantime, the Class Rep and the others should be leveling up a ton. The nerds had probably reached an astronomically high level. *What if their nerding abilities level up, too? That'd be too much to deal with!* If the jocks could reach the Class Rep in town, everything should turn out fine. The girls could lecture them instead of me. If the enemy waited too long, his plans would never reach fruition.

What if the nerds level up until they're almost impervious? I wondered. We don't know how strong the enemy will be, so we need whatever advantages we can get. Knowing them, they probably went out and became the strongest people in the world without paying attention to anyone else.

I couldn’t let anything get in the way of their plans. I had to interfere with any outside interference. *While the two of us are busy interfering with each other, the others can leave us in the dust.*

In chess, you have to move, even if the only possible move leaves you in a weaker position. If I had to sacrifice myself like a pawn, I’d do it. I couldn’t ignore him, even if it meant that I was doomed. There were no good moves for either of us. For the first time, I felt alone.

I already made my move, so now I had to wait. If he went past the cave, I’d strike. If he didn’t, he’d run out of time. Waiting was agonizing. I took in a deep breath of the fresh forest air. I’d never stopped to just enjoy it before.

It was his bad luck that I happened to be waiting in this cave, I thought. Lady Luck let you down.

On the other hand, Lady Luck always gave me a warm smile. I found this cave and turned it into both a home and a final bulwark against my ultimate foe.

When we meet, we’ll find out just how much my luck is worth, I thought. I had the worst odds but the best luck.

It’s going to play out like it was always supposed to, I thought. Everything was going to plan…the worst possible plan for both of us.

I had no hope of survival. He had no hope at all.

He had worked so hard to split everyone up with Mental Manipulation, but thanks to the Class Rep, everyone came together.

I knew he was watching me, wondering why a nobody like me with such a low level was somehow the deciding factor. Killing me should be simple—I was a much lower level than the rest of our class—but clearly there was something strange about me, something he couldn’t figure out. He had to be wondering why *I* was the one waiting here.

He must’ve been sick and tired of me. I was like a pebble in his shoe, irritating and impossible to shake out. I must have been an unbearable nuisance to him. *It feels great.*

Restlessly, I wandered through the forest. I didn’t pick a direction, just walked. If I found something, I killed it. Otherwise, I kept walking.

The air was cool. Dew sparkled on the upper branches. No birds sang.

In the afternoon, I’d start running. For now, I walked to investigate and to exercise my skills.

Upriver, the monsters were weak and plentiful, optimal for level grinding. He could be level 30 or higher if he trained here. There was no point worrying. I kept walking, killing anything that crossed my path. I took some jerky out of my bag and bit into it. *It’s been a while. Still tastes like rubber.*

I felt like running.

Sprinting through the forest, I hunted all the prey around me. In a face-to-face fight, I knew I’d lose, so I snuck up and ambushed them instead.

I wasn’t strong, so I relied on my speed. At long range, I charged faster than they could react. At close range, I used my Life or Death technique. My

strategy hadn’t changed from the very beginning. I’d always fought like this.

Life or Death: unbelievable power that existed only for an instant. With blinding speed, I combined all my spells and abilities into that one deadly attack. In that blink of an eye, I approached the infinite.

Even though the goblins and I had been neighbors for nearly a month, we’d never really become friends. Villains from early in a manga generally came back to bail the hero out of trouble and become new allies, right? Even if that happened, they’d need to have their memories erased first; I’d been killing them for twenty-four days straight.

Oh yeah, I thought. In a typical story, I would’ve enthralled some goblins and kobolds as I fought my way through this forest.

I didn’t even see any more to enthrall! Did I kill them all?! *I’m no better than a kobold absentmindedly biting someone’s head off!* The only monsters I’d ever managed to collect and lead were a pack of mean girls… Where were the adorable, wildly powerful creatures loyal only to me? What had I become?!

There was nothing to do but keep hunting. This way, he wouldn’t be able to level up much more. If I was really lucky, I might even gain a level. He only wanted intel, and I only wanted experience. He wasn’t worried about me leveling up, and I didn’t care that he was spying on me.

A kobold king loomed over me. Seemingly exhausted, I collapsed forward, stopping my fall with a gentle half-step. In that moment, I instantaneously swung my staff with all my momentum. All my gravity, velocity, magic, and spirit were channeled into the single instant of my attack. If it didn’t land, the monster would bite my head off. *Please no!*

I pulled my staff loose from the king’s body. Now I knew that I could beat them. *I don’t have a choice! I don’t want to be chomped! Absolutely not!* Kobold kings were so fast that they left afterimages behind, and they could even perform overwhelming flurries of attacks, but that one hadn’t bothered. It only wanted to crunch my skull with its razor-sharp fangs. *I’m not physically hurt, but I* am *traumatized for life.*

There was no way I’d be able to beat a kobold emperor if it existed. I also shouldn’t stray too far from the cave. I took a roundabout route home.

Where was he? Don’t you realize that it’ll be too late for you soon? You shouldn’t underestimate the social awkwardness of nerds, the idiocy of the meatheads, and the terror of getting yelled at by all those girls. After you worked so hard to push everyone apart, they’re back together again—the real heroes of this world. They’ll reach heights that weren’t meant for supporting characters like us.

Did he ever consider that he had made a mistake?

DAY 24
MORNING
I can hear a spooky noise at night, but they berated me when I said the inn was haunted.
INTERLUDE:
DUNGEON

WE FOUGHT—no matter what, we kept fighting. We had to gain levels. That's what Haruka-kun asked us to do. We couldn't help him directly, but at least we could do as he asked.

I caught my breath.

"Is that Lamaze breathing?" Oda-kun asked me.

I'm not pregnant!

Oda-kun took us to a mysterious dungeon. This was the secret to their high level. They told us that there wasn't a better grinding spot than this.

I had no idea why dungeons existed in the first place. They made no sense, but Oda-kun said it was a good place to level, so I took his word for it.

I didn't need to understand this place—this world made no sense to begin with. However, we all understood that we had to become more powerful. We didn't know why we had to be stronger, but it was part of Haruka-kun's plan.

"Where did that snake come from?! It's wriggling toward me!"

"There are some monsters that you won't sense with Presence Detection," explained one of Oda-kun's friends. "Keep your eyes peeled for them."

Under Oda-kun's supervision, we alternated fighting and planning.

"Swap the vanguard," Oda-kun called. "Triangle plus one formation, but no thunder wall!"

"Aww," I said, and saw blue sparks go out.

As we rested, they gave us lectures on skills, fine-tuned our stats, optimized our magic usage based on our fighting styles, and helped us acquire new skills. They taught us everything there was to know. It felt like they had visited this world before and had mastered its rules. Were they really from Japan? How did they know so much? Haruka-kun wasn't kidding when he said that they had seriously prepared for being summoned to a fantasy world, even before we knew this place existed.

The first floor of the dungeon contained only goblins. They were easy to fight. The next floor was full of kobolds, but we weren't scared of them anymore. There was a den of bluewolves on the third floor. They were a bit troublesome, but we took care of them. *Eek!* Next were gargantuan insects that looked like water bugs!

Everyone should have freaked out and started screaming and causing mayhem, but instead we exterminated them methodically. *Gross, I'm not*

touching that. Whenever we slashed them, they spewed noxious effluvia all over the dungeon walls. Nonetheless, we kept killing them.
They weren't strong, just gross. They weren't even remotely dangerous. Frankly, they were beneath us. We didn't have any close calls—these things couldn't even make us flinch anymore.
Orcs roamed the warren of tunnels that made up the fifth floor of the dungeon. We were so grossed out by the bugs that we went all out fighting orcs.
The sixth floor was infested with nests of green snakes. They slipped past our Presence Detection and attacked from the shadows. We had no trouble dispatching them. We were stronger now. We killed the snakes whenever they attacked.
We were almost ready for the seventh floor. Our objective was to reach the twentieth floor by the end of the day. We didn't care if that was too ambitious—it was our goal, and we'd reach it. This was all we could do.
It's fine. Everyone seems fine. We're definitely not pretending.

It was just about time to go back. We didn't go past the seventeenth floor. According to Oda-kun, the monsters between the tenth and twenty-fifth floors were worth a roughly equal amount of experience. That meant we were in a great place for power leveling.
It wasn't a challenge. We took all our pent-up emotions out on those poor monsters, and they never stood a chance.
"Like, these praying mantis monsters are no problem!" Shimazaki-san said.
The seventeenth floor was swarming with these mantises. They also sprayed bug juice everywhere when they were stabbed—even more juice than the bugs from the fourth floor. *They look just like cockroaches! Don't get any closer! Stay away from me!*
"We're out of time, so let's get going," said Oda-kun. "Swap the vanguard, split into two teams, and mop up any other monsters on the way back."
After some initial confusion, a chorus of agreement rang out. Everyone kept pretending that everything was okay.

Most of us were almost level 50. Shimazaki-san and her friends, who were sharing experience points with Haruka-kun, were over level 60. We'd catch up to Oda-kun and his friends in a matter of days.
Everyone was determined to get stronger, single-mindedly focused on getting stronger, even though no one was really sure why. *Are we really doing the right thing?*
Everything will turn out fine. Let's keep pretending that we feel fine.

From my bed, I could hear the others sobbing.

DAY 24
EVENING
♦
THE CAVE

I SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY farming goblins, kobolds, mushrooms, and fish. All I could do was walk.

I didn't level up any further, but my skills did, and I acquired some new ones to boot. So today wasn't a total waste of time. I hoped that *he* was intimidated by my skills.

I was so certain that the delinquents, under *his* total control, would spring an ambush on me, but it never happened. Then the idiot jocks probably defeated the delinquents, meaning he was alone after all—the monster behind the curtain, the puppet-master who pulled everyone's strings, disguised as a too-ordinary high school boy.

The forest was desolate. All I had to do was wait. His plots and machinations were all in place. I just had to throw a wrench in the works, break the gears of his master plots. Disrupt the whole edifice and send it tumbling down. I could feel the tenseness in the air. He'd be here soon. Should I go out to meet him? If he wanted to visit, he would. Otherwise, he'd have to go past my cave regardless.

I savored a late dinner—fish poached in a soy sauce marinade—and took a bath. Today was a good day and the worst of days.

He arrived, looking as normal as ever.

"Oh, hey there, Tanaka-kun," I said. "It's been a while. You got here pretty late. It's too late for you, did you know that? So why now?"

DAY 24
EVENING
Of course a bunch of scruffy, incomprehensible idiots would get arrested by the guards.
INTERLUDE:
OMUI CITY

ON OUR WAY BACK to Omui City, we came across a group of five scruffy-looking guys standing outside the gate. I raised my guard but only for a moment.
"Kakizaki-kun, is that you?" I exclaimed. "What—what happened to you? I guess Haruka-kun isn't with you."
"Hey, Class Rep!" he said.
All at once, the five bowed and yelled, "We were stupid! Please forgive us!"
The athletes, Kakizaki-kun and his friends, were alive. Haruka-kun had said he was going to check in on the meatheads, as he liked to call them.
They all had black hair and dark eyes. *Just another reminder of Haruka-kun.*
The athletes looked like they'd been dragged through hell. The gatekeeper couldn't understand their babbling, so he detained them. They were so battered and exhausted that they could hardly move. Kakizaki-kun groaned as he shifted his weight to his other leg and leaned against the gate.
It sounded like they, as injured as they were, ran here straight from the cave without even stopping to sleep. They ate stamina mushrooms as they journeyed so they could keep running.
Their armor, once whole, was now in ragged pieces. Some were missing pauldrons; others had gaping rents in their hauberks. Their tunics underneath were tattered, blood-stained shreds.
They must've been healed somehow, but their armor told the story of what had happened.
The athletes suffered horrific injuries trying to protect us. They almost died for us. That's why Haruka-kun kept trying to leave. In our shameful selfishness, we held him back. It was our fault. Kakizaki-kun and his friends had rushed back to tell us what happened, to tell us that Haruka-kun was still out there.
That was the worst news of all. Some of the girls started bawling. No one expected this to happen. If Haruka-kun knew about Tanaka-kun all along, then of course he had to leave.
If we had chased after him as soon as we found out, we would've been killed as well. Despite how high level we were now, we still stood no chance.
I'd originally assumed that our enemy was that group of wannabe delinquents led by Katsuyama-kun. I noticed that the other boys were acting strange, but I ignored my suspicions—I was preoccupied with making sure

everyone didn't kill each other. That's why I didn't want Haruka-kun to go; there wasn't any point to him putting himself in danger like that. I thought that if we really did have to fight, as long as we didn't hesitate, we could help.
But I miscalculated. If we chased after him, willing to kill without hesitation, we would have only doomed ourselves.
I didn't even want to think about what would happen now. It was too horrible.
I couldn't understand why Haruka-kun left the way he did, but it was too late to think about that.
"He's a total beast," Kakizaki-kun said. "He's mastered swords and spears completely, and he has unlimited magic."
A friend of Kakizaki-kun's said, "What was the name of that one bastard? Katsuyama? He fought them first. He blindsided them and killed all six like an assassin! They totally thought he was their bro, bro!"
"Yeah, yeah! Now he can use Katsuyama's illusion skill! He's unstoppable!"
That sounded a lot like my skill, Hijack—it allowed me to steal skills from anything I killed.
Another athlete said, "We couldn't even lay a finger on him, no matter what we tried! Five-on-one didn't make a damn difference."
"Dude was practically immune to magic, too! It was like, yo, how many skills could you possibly have, know what I mean?"
"He paralyzed, blinded, and poisoned us! If it weren't for those shrooms, we would've died!" Kakizaki-kun raised his voice, emphasizing his point, and then winced in pain.
"Like, he's supposed to be a conjuror, right? How the *hell* did he get so good with spears?"
"After he killed Katsuyama, he started using swords too! He could use all of Katsuyama's skills, bros."
"He's got so many skills to choose from you can never guess what's coming! Damn bastard!"
"We couldn't even dodge, his attacks always hit! It was total BS!"
Kakizaki-kun and his friends were all level 43. Their instincts were far sharper than average. They had Super Speed, Vorpal Slash, Continuous Sword…all kinds of max-level cheat skills. Still, they hadn't stood a chance. The athletes should've been unbeatable in melee, but they were no match for *him*. They retreated without landing a single hit. Meanwhile, twelve other boys were murdered despite their incredible cheat skills. They were betrayed.
His abilities sounded strange and incomprehensible. He apparently had both Hijack and Inflict Ailment. No one could hit him with melee or magical attacks. On the other hand, his attacks always landed.
How did he become so powerful? Haruka-kun, who was supposedly the weakest of us all, was just as inexplicably powerful. Haruka-kun always claimed that he would die if an attack connected, but I'd never once seen

anything hit him. At the same time, he insisted that he was weak, but I'd never seen an enemy survive more than one attack from him.
They were both contradictions. Fighting them was out of the question. No wonder Haruka-kun left us behind. *They were each other's match.*

Kakizaki-kun told me that Haruka-kun had a message for me. He said, "Sorry for being stupid." *His last words.*

DAY 24
EVENING
All I needed was that less-than-one-percent chance.
THE CAVE

FOR A GOOD LONG WHILE, I'd been dodging his endless combinations of sword attacks. He had an inexhaustible supply of techniques.

Natural genius was real. It had nothing to do with personality. This kind of genius wasn't born from hard work and lived experience—it was innate. Tanaka-kun was known as a math savant. It was clear that he had disguised his mathematical genius in the real world. He was nondescript in every way.

Our battle must have been frustrating him. His calculations weren't working. He recalculated the odds over and over, but they were always off. He just didn't comprehend. My luck went beyond any probabilities or formulas.

Even though his attacks missed less than one percent of the time and he had performed thousands and thousands of them, that tiny probability of failure kept me alive. All I needed was that less-than-one-percent chance. It could never become zero. My maximum luck broke all the laws of probability. It shattered the scales of fate. With his odds, he could never kill me.

That didn't discourage him. He kept slinging spells and slashing his sword, indiscriminately using techniques.

His skills stopped working, one by one. He grew frustrated. Whenever his calculations went awry, it inflamed his anger.

"You've got quite the array of skills," I said. "How many people did you have to kill?"

Distance wasn't a factor in our battle; we fought at close- and mid-range. I didn't bother with spells, since they couldn't damage him. I focused on baiting him into using up his skills instead. I just needed to survive long enough.

"Haruka-kun," he said, his voice calm like we were still in class. "Why are you alive?"

"Uh, I guess I don't want to die."

His eyes narrowed in disappointment. His mood only worsened. Was hunger making him angry? *Have some nice fish—it's good for you!*

Logically, I should have been killed hundreds of times over. *You couldn't predict this, could you?*

"How the hell are you doing this?! Answer me!"

Every time he missed, it wounded his pride.

"What exactly don't you get?"

“You’re a puny level 11! No matter your skills, there’s no way you should stand a chance against me!”
In terms of probability, that was basically true. I avoided thousands of all-but-inevitable deaths, what were a few more? My survival was an anomaly—infinitely improbable. But so long as my survival was *possible*, no matter how unlikely, I would live.
“Whoa there, Mathlete, are you running numbers in your head in the middle of a battle? Very impressive.”
Oops. Sweeping my staff, I was able to absorb his spell, but I nearly lost my grip on it when he feinted and slashed at my hand instead of my neck. He had to go all out if he wanted to kill me. What was holding him back? I was bloodied, battered, and exhausted, so why was he fighting so defensively?
“You shouldn’t be able to move, let alone fight back! You shouldn’t even be able to see! It’s impossible!”
He finally let his mask of normalcy slip. This was who he really was.

“Do you want to know why?” I said. “Why Copycat and Meddle aren’t working?”
“You know about them?!” he cried. “You shouldn’t be able to use Appraisal! How…how?”
I didn’t need to use Appraisal, I knew he took those skills as soon as I spotted them back in the white room.
“Copycat is a worse version of Hijack,” I said. “It only lets you use a weakened skill a limited number of times, doesn’t it?”
“Even an inferior copy of Power Word Kill should’ve destroyed you! You’re only level 11! Tell me how you’re doing this!”
Even Power Word Kill didn’t have a 100 percent chance of working. Because of the level wall, I shouldn’t have been able to resist status ailments and special attacks. But I could, because—
“I’ve got the General Health skill, got it? That means I’m healthy! Take care of your body, and it’ll take care of you!”
The meatheads didn’t stand a chance. He inflicted Blind, Paralyze, and Poison on them, tricked them with Katsuyama’s Illusion skill, and used Meddle to make their attacks miss and their attempts to dodge fail. He broke their minds and their bodies.
Meddle interfered with their bodies just enough to alter the trajectories of their attacks without them realizing. That’s why they couldn’t hit him.
He was using Meddle on me this entire time, of course. But it wasn’t a problem at all. In fact, I ignored it completely.
There was a reason I acquired and leveled Manipulation skills so quickly. Meddle was just a knockoff of the skills I’d been training all along.
“Do you know what my Blockhead skill does, mathlete?”
“It’s just another useless skill, obviously! It suits you perfectly!”
Wrong answer, genius. Being good at math didn’t make him any good at reading comprehension.
“There’s a reason it references those wooden puppets, Tanaka-kun,” I said. “You’re using Meddle to interfere with my movements, but I can just block my own nerve signals with Blockhead and keep control of my own body.”
That was why I could fight back. There was no way I could win, but I could keep fighting. Blockhead allowed me to control my own body like a marionette. I practiced walking using Magic Manipulation. Having made it routine, I was eventually able to force my body to take an impossible half-step and discovered Life or Death. Blockhead made that technique possible. I manipulated my body, channeled all my abilities into a single moment, and delivered a life-or-death blow.
Thanks to my Mistletoe Sprig absorbing combat spells, I could avoid succumbing to a battle of attrition.
He lurked in the woods, picking off classmates for their skills. Meanwhile, my classmates dragged me to town and kept me from leaving. In a way, that was why we turned out so different. I learned to see the humanity of my classmates.

Until he used all his skills in an ultimate attack, there could be no checkmate.
I just had to stick it out until then. Crushing my legs with magic didn't stop me, and Illusion was useless to begin with. Thanks to God's Eye and my contacts, I couldn't be fooled. As long as I was still alive, I could puppet my tattered body and keep fighting.
"You doin' all right, Tanaka-kun? Those stolen skills can't be used infinitely, can they? Do you really want to use them all up like this? The rest of our class is strong, too!"
He spat. "Then I'll just steal their skills!"
Bingo. Copycat limited the number of times he could use a stolen skill.
Sooner or later, the show had to end. I was his worst foe because I had nothing he could steal. All my skills were either useless or too difficult to control.
If I could force him to use all his skills, I would win. It would all be over. He wouldn't be able to defeat the Class Rep and the others. He'd no longer have any of the cheat skills that helped him so far. I had to make sure that he used them all.
From the moment we were summoned to the white room, he was furiously calculating everything he might have to contend with. He had formulated the exact steps to take to become the strongest person in the world.
If he took Hijack, the others would have sealed the skill immediately, if they didn't just kill him. The Class Rep would've made sure of that. So this mathlete calculated the route with the highest probability of becoming the strongest.
As he forced our class apart, his chances of success increased all the more. Doing that eliminated unknowns from his equations.
When an opportunity presented itself, he used Copycat on Hijack and began hunting his classmates, now spread across the forest. He killed them and took their skills, making a point to get Magic-Proof, Inflict Ailment, and Illusion as fast as possible.
He believed that Meddle made him invulnerable. According to his calculations, no one could threaten him any longer.
He wanted to be unbeatable in battle. He had become a Cheat Slayer.
At last, his preparations were complete.
There was only one step left. He needed to replace the copy with the real Hijack. He needed to kill the Class Rep. He knew that the copied skill could only be used one more time. That's why the Class Rep was his next target.
Then he would have been able to kill the rest of our classmates, steal their legendary skills, and become an invincible, unstoppable, perfect monster.
The meatheads survived because he couldn't waste that last use of Hijack. He crushed them, but he wouldn't kill them yet. Hijacking the meatheads' skills this early would've ruined his plan.
He likely wanted to kill the nerds first and get his hands on Mesmerize and Puppetry. So he allowed the delinquents to live for a while. But when the

meatheads came close to taking out the delinquents, he decided they'd outlived their usefulness. He worried that he would lose the opportunity to steal their skills, so he betrayed the delinquents, killed them all, and used the skills he stole to defeat the meatheads.
He blended in with the normal guys and fooled the wannabe delinquents. When he was afraid that he'd lose his coveted skills, he slayed them without mercy. Now, he was alone. *Could you kill me if you still had your friends?*
All the people with the skills he wanted had run away to town. This was his last chance to get the real Hijack, but I was in his way.
Normally, he would have bulldozed straight through me, but he couldn't defeat me. He didn't know how to finish me off. None of his moves had a 100 percent chance of landing.
My abilities were weird unknowns to him. They upset all his careful calculations. I was a complete mystery, so he kept me isolated and under observation. He even killed off his last two companions to get Power Word Kill. With our level gap, he thought he'd couldn't lose.
But he couldn't kill me. His three greatest skills—Meddle, Illusion, and Inflict Ailment—had no effect on me.
Even though he had an overwhelming level advantage, he had only won in the past by tricking and surprising his targets. That's why he panicked when he couldn't beat me.
He really did screw up, didn't he? I thought. It's almost disappointing. I'm going to slip through this genius's probabilities, wait for him to use up his abilities, and put an end to him!
His plan to kill me had failed. He probably could've pulled off a 100 percent foolproof attack if he combined all his skills into one massive finishing move, but if he did that, his plan would fall apart, and the others would take him out easily. Even if I died, he still lost. But that one hypothetical hybrid attack was still possible, even considering everything he'd already used up. I couldn't let up, couldn't slip for a moment.
That was my biggest fear, but he disappointed me. He misunderstood probability in such a devastating way. He thought that five or six attacks with a 99 percent chance to kill was better than a single attack with a 100 percent chance. He mistook something that was almost impossible for something that was impossible. Of course it wasn't! *This strategy hasn't worked so far, so why do you think it will kill me?!*

It must have felt unfair.
"Hey, you, uh, Yamanaka-kun? We can stop fighting. I'm bored."
"It's Tanaka! You literally just called me Tanaka two minutes ago!"
Huh? His name wasn't Yamanaka? He was boring, so I stopped paying attention.
"You've gotten too greedy. You're just a background character, Yamamoto-kun," I said. "You shouldn't have stepped out of line. You don't belong in the limelight. Not even I belong there. No matter how much you tried to change

that fact, we're not protagonists. You went too far, and now you'll die an unimportant background character. Farewell."
He should've anticipated that I was trying to make him waste his skills. So why did he fall for such an obvious strategy?
Mistaken-kun here wasted all of the incredible skills that he copied. What a shame.
His calculations promised that Instant Death and Inflict Ailment were enough to deal with me. He ignored his limits to the very end. Even skills like Sword Mastery Max, Sublime Spell Mastery, and Perfect Evasion went to waste.
How did he make such a stupid mistake? He really thought he was the main character here? What an idiot!
To try to kill *me* with probability… *I literally have unlimited luck!* He couldn't have made a worse bet.
I didn't have cheat skills, but my stats changed everything. Infinite luck wasn't on the list of skills, so it was beyond his imagination. He probably wouldn't have screwed up if I weren't so lucky.
"Goodbye, Yamamura-kun."
I took a half-step into that moment between life and death, and killed him.
I have no idea who he was, oh well.
Oh shit. I just remembered that my last words to the Class Rep were "Sorry for being stupid." Why would I admit that?!

DAY 24
LATE NIGHT
♦
INTERLUDE:
OMUI CITY

EVERYONE WAS EXHAUSTED—on the verge of collapsing into restless sleep. We sobbed and cried helplessly. None of us could bear to think of tomorrow…
I can't stand this! I decided that I would go alone. It didn't matter that I was the Class Rep, I couldn't lead anyone else to certain doom.
I just wanted to be with him, even if it meant that we would die together.
Tanaka was after my skill, Hijack. I'd sooner die than let him have it.
I'll kill myself with my own hands if it'll stop him from killing anyone else, I thought.
Then Haruka-kun wouldn't need to die. That was the real reason why Haruka-kun didn't tell me what he was up to. That's why he left without a word.
I didn't know if I could reach him in time. But I needed to run to the cave as fast as possible. Haruka-kun—he was the only thing that mattered.

I snuck out of my room and passed through the dining hall.
Everyone had laughed together here. We smiled even as we scolded Haruka-kun for whatever ridiculous thing he'd said last.
I slipped outside. The first time I saw this inn, Haruka-kun had tried to burn it to the ground. Everyone used to be so lively!
I hurried through the town gates. Haruka-kun was always up to his usual antics here. He caused so much trouble that I just had to laugh, even when I was furious a moment before.
I was still mad at him, even now.
Why the hell was he trying to get past the gates at this hour—*Whaaaat?!* I couldn't believe it. There he was.
"Uh, hey. I'm back. Kind of…y'know?"
I didn't know what to say. He looked awful. I couldn't begin to imagine what had happened. But Haruka-kun was standing there. He came back. He made everyone worry so much!
For now, I'll give him a good lecture on his behavior!
His return filled everyone with hope. We all reprimanded Haruka-kun together. Even as we yelled at him, we couldn't stop giggling.

Haruka-kun, welcome home.

DAY 25
MORNING
If I burn the nerds, will I finally be able to escape from this circle of questioning?
THE LADY FINGER BOUDOIR

I GOT ONE HELL of a lecture last night. It started late at night and continued all the way through sunrise and into morning. In fact, this mighty lecture was still ongoing. They surrounded me completely. Maybe I could escape if I torched a few of them. What if I just torched the nerds? They could do with a good grilling—I never wanted to save them in the first place! *I'll just burn them a little; I think that's fair!*
They wouldn't lay off. I tried to tell them, but they refused to listen. It was the best solution to an awful situation! I really was the only one who could handle him!
They blamed me for everything that had gone wrong. But why? That Kawashita-kun or whoever was the real villain!
Then they confiscated the rest of my funds. That was going too far!
I tried my best to save everyone, and this is how you repay me?!
Class Rep had called one of her meetings to session. The nerds told me that they weren't planning on rescuing me. *Sheesh, can't you think before you talk for once?!* I'd hunt them later. Maybe give their scalps a little scorching.
The meatheads were predictably stupid, and that was fine. I didn't expect anything else.
"So, what happened?" the Class Rep asked me. "Why couldn't they touch him?"
"Oh, he meddled with their nervous system, or something."
Meddle, Illusion, and Inflict Ailment—no one could have defeated that combination normally.
"And how was he stealing everyone's abilities without Hijack?" Class Rep asked.
I shrugged. "Hmm? Oh, he was using Copycat to copy everyone's powers."
That was why no one was on the lookout for him. He was able to plan without attracting anyone's attention, which is why it all worked out.
"He must've had so many skills," Class Rep said. "He killed thirteen of us."
"I think he had Magic-Proof, Power Word Kill, Inflict Ailment, and Illusion. Maybe some other things?"
It was the perfect combination to kill our classmates, leveraging their overpowered skills against them. His plan was precise, plotted out so he acquired everything in a specific order. At the last minute, he had to change it up and improvise, and that's what finished him.

“But why were you the only one who could handle him?” Vice Rep B asked.
They’re swaying—no, nothing! I’m not looking at anything! I swear!
I said, “Isn’t it obvious? He turned himself into a Cheat Slayer, but I don’t have any cheat skills.”
Everyone finally understood.
Cheat skills were automatic, instinctual. They were powerful but not consciously controlled. If you had one, you could use it. But I did everything the hard way, so I had nothing he could copy. None of my skills worked automatically—I had to figure them out myself. His plan never could have worked. He was screwed no matter what.
“We fought in front of the cave, so I think my Shut-In ability protected me, too,” I said. “Come to think of it, that’s probably why I never died in the forest even though I was such a weakling.”
I had to go back to the cave and establish that it was my true home. I wouldn’t have been able to defeat him or even survive anywhere else.
“I thought he was a genius at first, but he was just a regular idiot. He could’ve overwhelmed me if he used up all his cheat skills at once. But if he did that, he wouldn’t have had any cheat skills left to use on the rest of you! The way I see it, he was doomed no matter what he did, right?”
The meatheads put up a good fight and exhausted some of his skills. That’s why he killed his remaining friends and stupidly decided to go after me instead. If he’d killed the meatheads and stolen their skills, or if he had just gone scorched earth on me instead of hoping the odds would work in his favor, he would’ve won.
What’s-his-face tried to overstep his role as a background character by trying to become the protagonist. In the end, he was killed by another background character without even becoming a proper background character himself. We should’ve destroyed each other, but he wore himself out instead.
He didn’t even show up until the story was almost over. We were all minor characters, props for someone else’s epic tale. I was supposed to be Classmate A, messing with goblins in the forest until Classmate B killed me. Then he’d lose his powers and get killed by monsters without ever leaving the forest. That’s what our story was supposed to be.
I was just a minor character, but aristocrats and heroes kept dragging *me* into important stuff. Even those guys didn’t think of themselves as heroes, unlike him. This story broke because he thought he was the most important person in it. The story snapped apart…but I survived.

In this fantasy world, in this world of swords and sorcery, where none of the natural laws were the same, he was foolish enough to believe that one still equaled one.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU ALL. To those of you who have read my novel online, nice to see you in print—my name is Shoji Goji. As an ultra-amateur author, I gave into temptation and tried writing a book without even knowing what an ellipsis was…which turned out to be important. At first, I thought this was all a scam, but then my editor talked to me over the phone, and I actually grinned with self-satisfaction?! I wrote way too many pages, and my editor tried to tempt me by saying, “Since nobody knows who you are, readers would much prefer an illustrated message by booota-sama.” I went ahead and did this anyway, but I’m definitely not going to push things any further. As an amateur who had never written anything like a novel before, I was super grateful to have an ultra-famous artist like booota-sama make wonderful drawings and agree to so many unreasonable demands (from my editor, of course!) To those who met the most unfortunate fate of having to edit over 500,000 characters (any problems were *obviously* my editor’s fault, you see), and to everyone at OVL Publishing who went through with publishing my novel in spite of everyone that advised them against it (you guys worked your butts off), thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I started writing this with the assumption that no one would ever read it. It’s only thanks to everyone who read my work online that it became a real book, so thank you for joining me on this journey.

Along the same vein, I went on countless digressions in writing this book, so if you enjoy it, it would bring me no small amount of joy if you kept reading my work.

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